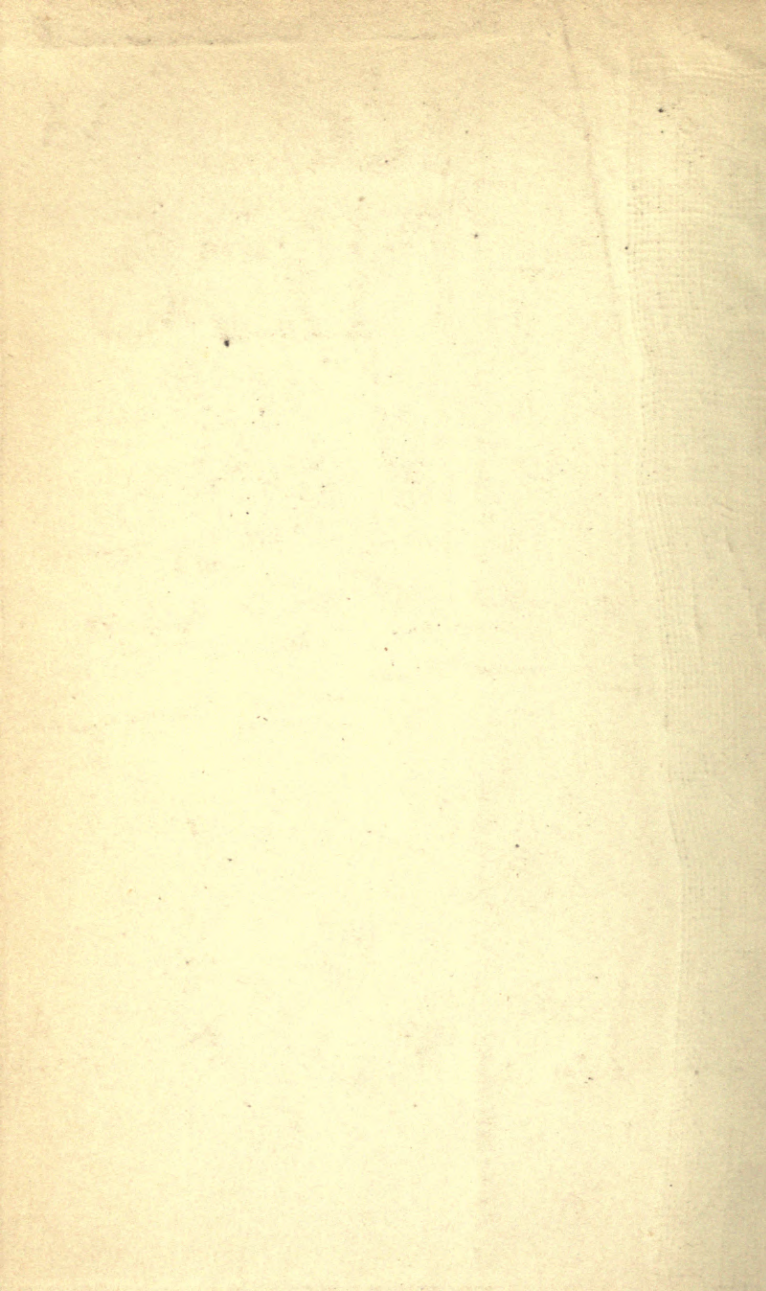


ROOK'S NEST

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Anna Weatherby Parry

"TOOK A FLEETING LOOK AT HERSELF IN THE LITTLE
CRACKED MIRROR"

Rook's Nest

BY

IZOLA L. FORRESTER

Author of "The Girls of Bonnie Castle," etc.



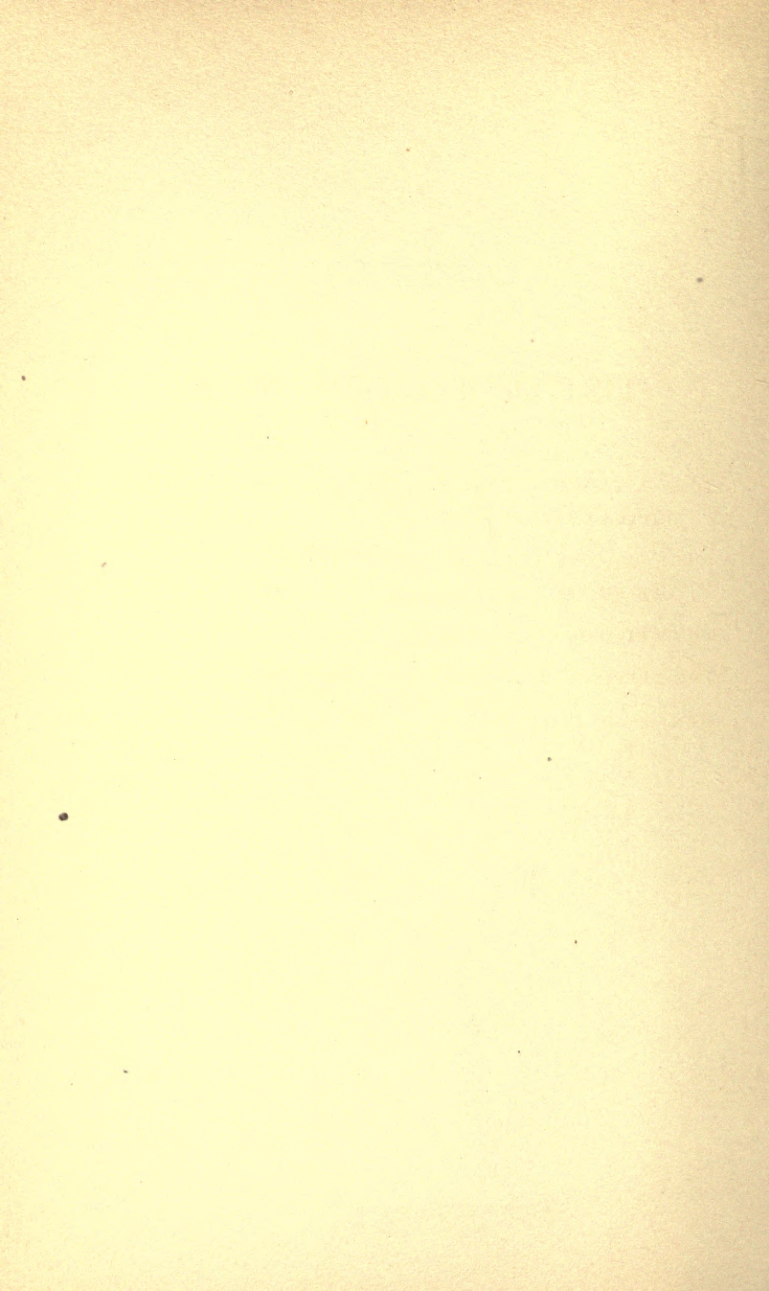
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CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	A COUNCIL OF STATE	7
II.	THE PRINCESS COMES TO HER OWN	20
III.	PRINCES IN DISGUISE	37
IV.	THE PALACE OF A THOUSAND DELIGHTS	58
V.	THE CIRCUS QUEEN	69
VI.	DAY DREAMS AND AIR CASTLES	89
VII.	THE BLACK PIRATE SAILS	109
VIII.	BREAD AND BERRIES	124
IX.	BILLIE MANAGES THINGS	133
X.	THE LION'S CAVE	151
XI.	ALL HALLOWS' EVE	170
XII.	AVIS TRIES HER WINGS	187
XIII.	A GUEST FROM BOSTON	205
XIV.	BETTY MORGAN, EDITOR	214
XV.	LETTERS	224
XVI.	THE THRESHOLD OF FAME	228
XVII.	THE CELLAR SPOOK	240
XVIII.	IN THE FOURTH FLOOR BACK	252
XIX.	THE PRINCESS' TREASURE	267
XX.	BETTY ENTERS THE ARENA	280
XXI.	RED ROVER TO THE RESCUE	291
XXII.	THE BIRDS FLY HOME	307
XXIII.	FAIRY TALES COME TRUE	318



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

TOOK A FLEETING LOOK AT HERSELF IN THE LITTLE CRACKED MIRROR	<i>Frontispiece</i>
"THE UNICORN WOULDN'T RUN IF YOU SHOT OFF FIREWORKS UNDER HIM."	<i>Page</i> 81
THE FRIGHTENED RUNAWAYS	" 164
THE PRECIOUS MANUSCRIPT LAY BESIDE HER.	" 216
HER HEAD ERECT, HER AIR RESOLUTE AND DEFIANT	" 298

Rook's Nest

CHAPTER I

A Council of State

THERE was no doubt about it; the crisis had come.

Avis caught the solemn gaze of Muggins' brown eyes fixed on her, all during dinner-time, and she knew that the moment had arrived when some one must speak.

"Girls and Billie," Muggins began, when Molly had left the room, "I want you all to come to the schoolroom after dinner. We have got to face the future."

This unwonted dignity from Muggins sent a thrill of excitement around the dinner-table, and a dead silence reigned until the time came when they trooped after her to hold the council for the future in the schoolroom.

They had always called it the schoolroom, because, as Billie said, it was the very last thing in

the world it ought to have been called. This rule of nomenclature applied splendidly in the house of Randall, from Muggins down to the Roaring Lion, who, by every law of reason, not to mention baptism, should have been dubbed plain Marjorie and Reginald. But then it made it so much more interesting to mix things up, they all agreed; so the schoolroom it had been, just because it was a place where discipline was unknown, where each had a pet corner of his own in which he could do exactly as he pleased.

The broad bay window with its row of flower-pots and hanging vines was Muggins', and she fostered all kinds of growing things there, from prize beauties to little straggly plants, precious only because they were green and alive, and repaid her care.

A wondrous paradise was this window wilderness to the two canaries, Hop Sing and Cripple,—a paradise of sunshine, and a happy hunting-ground of insect tidbits in which their greedy little hearts delighted. Even they could do just as they pleased, too, and Billie said that was the whole secret of happiness. "Every one does as he pleases, so long as it doesn't hurt the next fellow's fun, and if you can help the next fellow to have more fun, why, go ahead and help like sixty."

Behind the Japanese screen with its fire-spout-

ing dragons, and slant-eyed, waddling ladies, Billie kept a host of treasures. Only the Lamb knew positively all its secrets, and she never told.

One day after infinite labor and danger, not only to his own precious anatomy, but also to the Owl's back, the Roaring Lion had valorously climbed to the top of the screen and stolen a peep at the hidden chamber ; but all he saw was "bugth on pinth," as he told the Owl, scornfully, which opinion simply goes to prove that the only appreciative mind in the whole menagerie was the Lamb's.

Then the piano and the low, stout, bookcase, and the rosewood desk that had been her mother's, belonged to Avis ; "her royal highness," Billie called her, because, he said, "she puts on airs." The corner which held these articles was the only place of unquestioned ownership in the whole schoolroom, for the menagerie held firmly to the doctrine of squatter rights and spread their goods and chattels about with a serene disregard for law and order.

The spring sunlight shone cheerily into the long room and touched Muggins' brown hair to a ruddy bronze as she stood beside the piano, looking slim and girlish in her black dress, in spite of her seventeen years.

Avis, but a year younger, had crossed to the

window and was looking dreamily out, her nose pressed against the pane, her fair hair falling below her waist in two long braids, her hand resting on the back of the willow rocking-chair.

The children knew of what she was thinking, and their faces were very sober. The willow chair had always been the favorite seat of the dear mother who had left them but recently, and some way her presence was so closely associated with it that now it lent a strength to the conference as if she herself were smiling on them as of old.

Billie was sitting cross-legged on the floor, looking like a round-faced, jolly Chinese idol, with the menagerie grouped around as attendant cherubs.

Dora was the Lamb, and if ever there was a cub wolf dancing about in the fleece of an innocent lambkin, it was this same freckled, brown eyed rogue of eleven. She was a second edition of Billie and his trusted confidant. He declared that she was "an out and out brick," which was the highest meed of praise he ever bestowed. Only three had ever been deemed worthy to bear it, his mother, Muggins, and the Lamb. The rest of the world, without respect to persons, was classed as "duffers," and that meant more than words can tell to Billie.

The Owl was Winifred, aged nine, and the look

in her solemn hazel eyes seemed to tell of a secret wisdom beyond mortal ken. She was a very gentle, dignified little maid, full of dreams and fancies like Avis, and a deep tender love for fairies and beautiful forlorn princesses, and splendid knights who wore coal-black plumes and killed griffins and various other monsters, rescued the beautiful princesses, and made them less forlorn. Wini-fred's world was a wonderful world of make believe that never failed her, and her faithful admirer was the Roaring Lion.

It is hard to tell just how the six-year-old Lion looked. He was blue-eyed, and shy, with yellow curls and the softest, gentlest voice in the world, a voice that might have come from Hop Sing or Cripple if one of them had suddenly tried to talk; but Billie had named him the Roaring Lion, and he bore the title without a murmur.

Muggins looked at Billie when she spoke, for he, though not yet fourteen, was the man of the house now, and must be impressed with the gravity of the situation.

"It seems queer for us to have to bother ourselves about such a thing as money," she said, hesitatingly, "but matters have come to a point now where we must face the question boldly, and do something."

She paused. Billie nodded his head encourag-

ingly. So did the Lamb, and feeling that she had sympathetic support, Muggins went on bravely.

"Of course, you all know that we are pretty poor, now. The money that papa left melted away after he died, and when mamma was taken sick last fall she had to mortgage the house. We have been living on the last of that money for six weeks, ever since mamma went away from us, and now, here we are. I have about ten dollars left, and there is Molly to pay, gas bills, coal bills, grocer bills, butcher bills, the interest due on the mortgage"——

"Oh, Marjorie, don't!" exclaimed Avis, in distress, "don't worry them with such things."

"That's all right, your royal highness," Billie broke in, with a wave of his hand in her direction. "This is a council of state, not just for you two prime ministers. Fire ahead, Muggins. And when the ten dollars are gone you'll have to play Old Mother Hubbard,

Old Mother Hubbard, she went to the cupboard,
To get her poor dog a bone;
But when she got there the cupboard was bare,
And so the poor dog had none!"

"Don't be funny over it, Billie, please," pleaded Muggins. "We are really in serious trouble. Here are six of us, and we simply cannot go on

living as we have been doing. There isn't a soul in the world of whom we can ask help."

"There are mamma's folks," Dora said, impetuously, "I thought they were all so rich."

Avis and Marjorie exchanged quick glances.

"Well, so they are," Avis responded; "but you know how angry they were about mamma's marrying a poor man like papa, because they didn't know how clever he was, of course. After Grandma Newell died, none of them ever wrote to her, and if they could be so cruel to her, why, we must show them that the Randalls are too proud to ask help from them!"

"Bravo!" cried Billie. "Hoist your flags, Randalls, and keep step to the music."

"And as for papa's people," Avis went on, ignoring his nonsense, "they are all down in Delaware or Maryland, I forget which, and we don't know anything about any of them except Uncle Cherrington Randall, and he's dead now. So here we are—alone."

There was a long silence. The Lion's mouth quivered, and the Owl stifled the coming roar in her hasty embrace. Avis' blonde head was bent over the rocker, and her tears fell fast on the faded blue silk head-rest. Billie looked at Muggins, his head on one side like an anxious canary.

"Out with it," he said, finally. "What's your scheme, Marjorie Cherrington Randall?"

"That's just the key to the whole secret," cried Muggins, eagerly. "It's about Uncle Cherrington. You know part of it, anyway, Billie. Don't you remember, nearly five years ago, papa had a letter from uncle? And papa told us that he was the queerest old bookworm, and cross as a bear; but he was my fairy godfather, I guess, for he wanted to adopt me, and take me way out to Montana or some outlandish place with him. I was only twelve then, and, of course, mamma would not let me go. So he went alone, and died out there."

"I know," Billie said, sagely, "and we thought the jolly old duffer was rich, and he never left us a red cent."

"Yes, but still he made me his heiress," went on Muggins, earnestly. "It sounds very nice and important, but all in the world he left was a little place down in Illinois. Papa went to see it, and said it was just a few acres of land with a tiny, rattletibang sort of house about large enough for a rook's nest and only fit for spiders and mice. But, anyway, whatever it is, it's our very own, and the only thing I know for us to do is to go down to my kingdom. When papa died, he made Mr. Ellis, his lawyer, our guardian, and he says it will be the best thing for all of us."

"Just so," cried Billie, "Hurrah for Princess Muggins and the halls of her ancestors. Is there anything to eat down there, princess?"

Muggins laughed.

"I'm afraid not," she said, with a glance at Avis' bowed head. "We shall have to become farmers."

"Oh, but Muggins," interposed Dora, anxiously, "what can we do with all the furniture in such a funny little place, and where shall we put Molly?"

"We shall have to do with them what Aladdin did with the treasures he couldn't carry away," answered Muggins, cheerfully. "Leave them behind."

"Oh, why?" cried a chorus of dismay.

"Because!" she said firmly, and whenever she said that word, so deep and mysterious in conjecture, the children knew that argument was hopeless. This time, however, Avis came to the rescue.

"Everything will be sold," she explained, "except some of mamma's things, like her desk, and this chair, and Molly must go because we cannot pay her. Now, do you understand?"

Billie nodded, and the heads of the menagerie bobbed in concert.

"Do say something, Billie," exclaimed Avis. "You are the man of the house, and you must try to be sensible and helpful. Muggins and I can't do it all."

Billie's round face looked solemn and anxious

as he rose slowly, and stood with his hands clasped behind him; but there was a twinkle of fun in his blue eyes.

"I think the plan is all right," he said, gravely. "We can harness Reggie to the plow with the Owl, and put her royal highness in overalls to look after the crops, and Muggins can be chief cook and bottle washer. Dora and I will attend to the cows for you, and make the butter. We will raise peanuts and mince-meat"——

"Minth-meat don't gwow, Bil-lee," put in the Lion, rebukingly.

"Pardon, folkses. I take that back. You can settle the character of our crops yourself, Avis. There is only one thing I want to know. Please may I keep my bug collection, or do they go with the rest of the valuables?"

"Well, all I have to say," Marjorie answered, severely, "is this. If you're going to take this matter as a joke, Master William, you'll find yourself greatly mistaken. Avis and I have talked and talked together about it, night after night, when you children were in bed, and we have fixed everything. Mr. Bonner is coming to-morrow"——

"Who's Mr. Bonner?" asked Dora, abruptly.

"He's a—a—," Muggins floundered, helplessly, and looked at Avis, who responded to the silent appeal bravely.

"Why, Mr. Bonner is a man who looks after furniture and things, you know"——

"No, ma'am, we don't know," replied Billie, firmly. "That's what burglars do. As man of the house I want to know exactly who Mr. Bonner is."

"Well, then," answered Muggins, "he buys second-hand furniture and pictures and pianos for some large company. It's all right, Billie. Mr. Ellis told us to go to him, and you know how mamma trusted Mr. Ellis. This is Monday; by Thursday we can be all packed up, and on Friday we will go to East Elmore on the 1.25 train, get there at 4.40, and be at the Nest in time for supper. What do you think of the plan?" she concluded, triumphantly.

"I think that your old council was a humbug," cried Billie, rising in his wrathful indignation. "You two had the whole arrangement cut and dried between you, and only wanted to show off what a smart pair of prime ministers you are. Now, you can go right ahead. I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"And so do I," echoed Dora.

"And I," chimed in Winifred.

"Me too," said the Lion.

"You hear the voice of the people? Very well. You can leave us entirely out of all your hididdle

plans. Go on with your Bonners and trains, and packing. Only, when you do reach your old Rook's Nest, have supper for six, please. We won't be out of that, will we, polliwogs?"

"No, sirree!" came a fervent chorus, and the whole menagerie formed in line, Reggie leading, with Winnie's hands on his shoulders, Dora's on Winnie's, and Billie's on Dora's. Then wheeling about, they made a spirited circuit of the room, and marched out with colors flying.

The girls watched them in silence, Avis with an anxious frown, Muggins with smiling lips and tearful eyes. When the door had closed on Billie's rosy face and merry eyes, Avis sat down, and laid her head on her arms.

"Oh, don't, don't, Avis," said Marjorie, her face pressed closely to the other's fair hair. "It makes it so hard for me if you give up, dear. Everything will come all right, I know it will, only we must brace up, as Billie says, and be strong and hopeful for their sakes."

"Yes, I know, I know it all," replied Avis, wearily, raising a moist, flushed face, and pushing back her hair from her forehead. "But when I think of how dearly mamma loved the little ones, and of what a life we are taking them to, it nearly breaks my heart."

"But fit is the only way," Muggins said, slip-

ping her arm lovingly around her sister's neck. "We can only do our level best, and Mr. Ellis says we will get quite a little money from the sale, so we will not be so badly off. And when the time comes, Billie will be sensible, I know he will."

Just then Billie appeared at the side window, waving a croquet mallet at them invitingly.

"Come on and be beaten," he called. "Let's eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die, if you two are going to do the cooking at the Nest. Hashed spiders, and mouse fricassee! Whew!"

Avis laughed, a queer, unsteady laugh, and rose, wiping her eyes.

"Oh, yes, Billie 'll be sensible," she said. "Hear him."

Muggins shook her head doubtfully.

"We'll come," she replied, nodding her head to Billie, then with a comical look of mingled mirth and anxiety in her brown eyes. "The council of state is at an end."

CHAPTER II

The Princess Comes to Her Own.

FROM Monday until Thursday was the busiest time Marjorie ever went through. On Tuesday Mr. Bonner came with a note-book and a lot of little tags, and the girls followed him wistfully about while he placed his price on all that was to be sold.

When they reached the schoolroom there was a woeful-faced assembly awaiting their coming. Billie sat before the screen with blood in his eye. Woe betide the man who invaded his treasure house with tags.

Over near the bay window sat the menagerie in their own special chairs which they had sat in since babyhood, and all around them, heaped high to their knees, were the idols of their hearts which they had resolved to save from the hand of the destroyer.

A cross-eyed Japanese doll was hugged to the Lion's heart. The girls disdained dolls, but he had love to spare for every poor, maimed beauty they discarded, and now he had them all, little

wild-eyed penny dolls with long hair, and weak joints, plump bisque darlings in silk and velvet, and rubber dolls galore. Especially did the Lion's heart warm toward the rubber dolls, for in moments of emergency they could be transformed into the handiest weapons of war imaginable, and never showed the scars of battle. There were rag babies, too, brownies, pickaninnies, crazy little cotton pug dogs and cats,—all, all were there, and the Lion meant to guard them with his life.

Dora had Hop Sing and Cripple carefully caged beside her, and the Owl was almost hidden behind her stock of story books, while on each side rose all sorts and conditions of boxes and bundles whose wondrous contents no man knew.

Avis tried not to laugh when she saw the group, and it was not hard, for the very first thing that Mr. Bonner went to was her piano—the dearly loved piano that had been her last gift from her father, and of course that must go with the rest, for it would bring more money than anything else.

Marjorie slipped her hand comfortingly into hers, but some big tears rolled rebelliously from Avis' eyes, and she looked away when he put on a tag.

"What else, Miss Randall?" he asked, briskly, glancing around the room. "That rosewood desk?"

"Not much!" exclaimed Billie, his face reddening. "That was mamma's, and it's Avis' now, isn't it, Muggins?"

Marjorie met his eyes bravely. She knew just how he felt, in fact, she felt that way herself.

"The desk is to stay with us, sir," she said, firmly.

"And the willow chair? Table? Lounge? Screen? That's a handsome screen."

"No, sirree bob." Billie looked like a little fighting bantam as he strutted from his seat and faced the spoiler. "Those are all to stay. Muggins," with a suspicious solicitude, "you want to show the gentleman that nice big hat-rack out in the hall. There's nothing left for him in here."

Muggins flashed him a grateful glance, and seized on the hint as a relief from her perplexity. She really wanted to sell all she could, of course, for the sake of the money, but there were things in the dear old schoolroom which seemed so precious that nothing could buy them, so Mr. Bonner took his leave. After the door had closed, the menagerie rose in solemn silence, and joining hands with Billie, they danced a wild barbaric dance from the Feejees, over the downfall of the enemy.

But even after the packing was started in earnest, and everything had been settled about the

furniture, tears were the order of the day, and skirmishes were frequent between the menagerie and the packers, Avis and Muggins.

"You're the moistest lot I ever saw," said Billie, scornfully, and then Dora and he went off by their "lonelies" to lament in secret over the sale of their white rats to Tommy Baxter, next door, for a dollar. Billie had laid the money beside Muggins' plate carelessly, and only the Lamb guessed the sacrifice.

Reggie and Winifred were the dauntless conspirators, though. In the schoolroom stood three packing boxes, and alarums and excursions were frequent between these two and Marjorie. She would catch them stealing in with treasures to smuggle into the boxes, and as all "trash" was strictly forbidden, the paper dolls, marbles, broken china, ribbon ends, and all the rest were promptly thrown out, and the Owl and the Lion wailed in harmonious unison.

At last all was ready. The boxes and the few pieces of cherished furniture which they had saved had gone in a van to the depot, and the six were marshaled in the front hall, equipped for their journey. Molly had gone early in the morning, with many a kiss for her "darlints," and each room in the house had been visited and been given a fond teary farewell,

Mr. Ellis, the old, kindly faced lawyer, had volunteered to see them safely to the depot, and before the train started, he took Marjorie's hand and gave it a hearty clasp.

"Be brave, little girl," he said, gently, "and if you need help, do not hesitate to write to me. I have three of my own, bless them."

Marjorie could only smile through her tears and wave her hand as the train moved slowly away, and they started on their journey for East Elmore. Slowly the hours passed. In a short time the windows had lost their attraction and Dora had captured the conductor. When the menagerie had finished with him there was little he did not know about the home they had left, or the one to which they were going.

After lunch Muggins fell fast asleep from sheer exhaustion, and was sleeping peacefully, when all at once Billie shook her.

"It's four o'clock," he said, excitedly, "do wake up, Muggins, and see the country. We'll be in pretty quick."

Six noses were pressed close to the windows as the train swept on, past rolling uplands and low broad sweeps of pasture land, down by rivers and creeks. Then at last the train rounded a curve, and East Elmore came into sight. A quiet little country town on the side of a hill, with a broad

shallow river at its base. Muggins had turned from the window to collect the scattered bundles whose name was legion, and Billie came to help her.

"Say, sis," he said, with a trace of anxiety in his voice, "have you any idea how far this place is from town?"

Marjorie raised her head in a quick startled way.

"Why, no," she answered, slowly. "Uncle's letters were always postmarked East Elmore, and papa knew all about it. But I haven't the least idea where the house is. Some one will be able to tell us, though."

"Perhaps," Billie said, dubiously. "I hadn't thought of it before. Wouldn't it be funny if"—

"East Elmore," called the conductor, and the rest was all a scramble and bustle until the six stood safely on the platform before the depot, watching the smoke of the vanishing train.

"Now, then, you girls and the Lion go in there, and sit down while I find out about everything," Billie commanded, and Muggins gave him a grateful glance for relieving her of the responsibility.

First he tried the freight-agent who was busy with their luggage.

"Say, do you know a little old house around here somewhere?" he asked, bravely.

The man looked up at the sturdy little form before him, at the bright anxious eyes, and cap in

hand, for Billie never forgot his politeness. The freight agent was interested, and named over all the little old places he could think of, but they all had tenants, so the right one was still missing. Billie felt a trifle excited, and an old farmer, who had been leaning back in a chair on the shady side of the station, strolled forward to listen. He was short and stout, with a smooth shaven face, rosy and wrinkled, the wrinkles deepening around the merry blue eyes. Billie turned to repeat his question to the newcomer.

"Jest looking for a little old house," he repeated. "Well," after a moment's thought, "I guess I can suit you to a T. It's that place beyond the ravine, Jim, where old man Randall lived."

"Yes, sir; that's the name," broke in Billie, eagerly. "He was our uncle, and our name's Randall, too."

"I'll take you down to see it now, if you want to go, son," said the old man, kindly.

"Oh, thanks, but there are six of us," answered Billie.

The old man looked at him, his eyes twinkling merrily.

"Well, how you're all going to camp out in that little shanty is more than I can say," he remarked.

The Princess Comes to Her Own 27

Billie was distinctly discouraged. It was hard to hear the little home on which they had placed their hopes called a little shanty, but he swallowed back the lump in his throat, and asked,

"How far is it?"

"'Bout two miles, more or less. You can all come with me if you want to. Run, tell your folks, son."

"There are six of us, I said, sir," explained Billie. "The girls and the Li—I mean Reggie, and I."

"All youngsters?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well," after a pause, "come on," and there was a queer look in old Mr. Rogers' blue eyes as he watched the boy go into the waiting-room.

Billie was hailed with delight when he told of his success. He did not say anything about the shanty though. It might spoil everything, he thought, and make the girls feel badly.

"What about the boxes, and furniture, Billie?" Muggins enquired, anxiously.

"I don't know," he returned. "Let's ask the old duffer out there."

Accordingly, Mr. Rogers was interviewed, and after careful deliberation, and a survey of the pile of luggage, he agreed to carry as much of it as would go on the large hay wagon that was backed

up to the platform, and it was not long before the whole lot had been transferred.

"Now, then, you youngsters 'll have to catch on wherever it is handy," said Mr. Rogers, cheerily. "The brown-haired one had better sit up here with me and hold the little shaver on her lap. Son, you tuck the girls behind the last box, and swing on yourself at the end. All right, everybody? Get up, Charlie. G'long there, Nell."

Down the street, over the railroad track, and along the riverside road went the big wagon with its queer load, and the menagerie were uproariously jubilant. The heat of the day was past, and the shadows of the tall poplars and maples were lengthening. The grass by the roadside was thick with yellow dandelions, and Billie had to jump down at the Lion's order, and gather some of the tallest ones to make curly wiggles of. Then there were thorn apple-trees—clouds of pink and white blossoms here and there beneath the tall forest trees—and again it was Billie who accommodatingly got his hands well scratched breaking off fragrant branches for her royal highness.

"What do you reckon doing yonder?" asked Mr. Rogers, when they had left the town far behind.

Marjorie's face was lifted, her eyes soft and dreamy, her lips half parted in a smile of content.

The Princess Comes to Her Own 29

"Oh, just live and be happy," she said. "It is all so beautiful here."

"Yes," assented the old man, "it's a right nice place, and it's a pretty place, too, but fruit trees and posy beds aren't going to feed you six children."

"Oh, we're going to raise vegetables," Muggins said, hopefully.

"And peanuth," added the Lion, solemnly.

Mr. Rogers laughed, a jolly chuckle of a laugh that shook him from head to foot.

"Well, I hope you'll like it, and grow fat," he said. "Have you got any farm tools?"

Marjorie shook her head, and stopped thinking how lovely it would be to get lost in a great deep ferny ravine like the one they were passing, to wonder what they would do with tools, anyway.

"Didn't you ever raise anything?"

"Nary a 'tater," called Billie, from the end of the wagon. "But we're going to learn how."

"What are you going to do while the crops are growing?"

"Oh, have a good time all around, and eat grass," replied Billie, bravely. He felt that unless he met these practical posers, Marjorie's courage might vanish entirely at the prospect ahead, and that would never do.

"Well, my place is next to yours," Mr. Rogers

said, "and if you get into a hole just call on your neighbor. I'll help you out."

"Have you got any?" asked Dora, her curly head bobbing up from behind a box with startling suddenness.

"Any what?"

"Children."

"I've got Rob, that's all. Rob's a likely boy, too."

"Does he ever call girls names?"

"Guess not."

"Not freckles, or red-head, or—or anything horrid like that?"

Mr. Rogers laughed.

"If he did, his mother wouldn't own him. No, Rob isn't that kind. He likes dogs and rabbits, and turtles and squirrels, and all that truck. He's got a room full of all kinds of queer stuff that he thinks a sight of. Bird's eggs and such like, only he never takes but one egg from each nest. He wouldn't hurt anything for the world. Why I've seen him walk round an ant hill for fear he'd crush some of the ants. And he's got a fiddle, too; he can play on it like all get out when he gets started. And he draws pictures fine, too."

Dora planted her elbows on the top of the box, and leaned her chin on her palms thoughtfully.

"Is—is your boy pretty?" asked Winifred,

shyly, a vision of some of her favorite princes coming up before her.

"Well, no, not exactly," Mr. Rogers answered. "He doesn't look like me a bit. No, I don't think Rob will ever set the world afire with his good looks, but he's a good boy;" and here the old man had another laugh, this time so vigorous that Charlie and Nell pricked up their ears and made a fresh start homeward.

"I shall like that Rogers boy," Dora whispered, confidentially to the Owl. "I shouldn't wonder if he were a brick."

"But he isn't pretty," said Winnie, shaking her head, doubtfully. "I don't like homely people."

More ravines, more meadows with glimpses of the river now and then, dim at the margin with wood-green shadow trees, and blue with the reflection of passing clouds in midstream. The two miles were passed all too quickly, and finally the wagon drew up before a little gate. This and the top of a chimney were all one could see to show that there was a house beyond, for tall lilacs in full bloom stood all along the roadway as far as the fence went, and hid the interior from view like the hedge around the palace of the sleeping beauty. Then there were maples, too, their leaves light gold-green, and lacy above the lilacs, and still farther on, fruit trees like great

snowballs of blossoms, making an enchanted garden indeed.

All except Avis and Muggins were past the gate as soon as they could get there, exploring the new domain with shouts of triumph. The girls waited until Mr. Rogers had lifted out the furniture and set it in the garden with Billie's assistance. Then they thanked him warmly for all his kindness, and went in, feeling, as they shut the gate, a tingle of pride and pleasure. It was all their very own.

Up the path they went until they found the house, the funniest dot of a house, gray, in color, with morning glories and rose vines tangled all over the walls, and more lilacs on guard as sentinels. These could look over the top nearly, and nod a friendly greeting to the grape-vine on the tiny arbor that led to an old moss-grown well at the back.

The door was locked, and Billie had promptly gone to work in a business-like manner at the kitchen window.

"In you go," cried Dora, fairly dancing with excitement, as her hero tumbled valiantly in, and drew back the bolt on the kitchen door with the air of a conqueror.

"Oh, what a cobwebby nest it is," exclaimed Winifred, stepping daintily on the threshold.

The two windows faced the west, and the room

The Princess Comes to Her Own 33

was bright with the ruddy sunset glow, which shone on the dim walls and faded paint, with a kindly magic touch that lent them some of its beauty.

The furniture was meagre, a couple of chairs, a table, and a cupboard. On the dusty floor were two dingy braided rugs, and on a peg by the sink hung a crazy looking mirror with patches of quicksilver showing in unexpected places. The entry was in the centre of the little house, and ran straight through to the kitchen with a room on either side. One was a sitting-room, and here Uncle Cherrington had left his mark. The arm-chair drawn up beside the open grate with high curved back, and deeply hollowed seat, told of many a cosy, if lonely, evening spent before the wide old-fashioned grate.

There was a faded carpet on the floor, and the view from the windows on the green garden vistas and blossoming trees was very pretty.

Marjorie's heart grew lighter the more of her kingdom she saw, and already she had fixed on certain corners that would be just right for the desk or couch or the menagerie's playground.

The room opposite was a large bedroom with a tall four-posted bed in it that gave the girls the shivers. Last of all came a room that started behind the sitting-room, and extended the length of

the kitchen, after which it went off a way on its own account, making an "L" at the south corner.

"What a funny place," Dora said, as they ran through the rooms, not minding the dust, but laughing and shouting over new discoveries at every step. "There ought to be an old witch to pounce out on us and change us into birds or lizards, and then we'd have to wait until a prince came to break the spell."

"I wish your old princes would come and bring something to eat," grumbled Billie, dismally. "I could eat fried doormat."

"Me, too," echoed the Lion, with a gentle sigh of endurance.

Avis looked at Muggins. Words were not needed between them. Here were six hungry children, and not a mouthful to eat in the nest.

"Let's go out, and look after our things in the yard," said Muggins, cheerfully. "We must get some of them in before dark, you know, Billie."

So back they all went to the garden, and piece by piece the treasured bits of furniture were brought into the new house until everything was in except the three boxes.

"We'll have to camp any old place to-night, girls," Billie said, after it was all done, and they sat cross-legged in a circle under the lilacs. "Say, Muggins, can't you think of a single thing to eat?"

Marjorie shook her head dolefully.

"I never thought about anything except our lunch on the train when we left the other house," she answered. "Whatever can be done?"

A gloomy silence fell on the little group. Avis had a spray of apple blossoms and was thoughtfully munching the delicate petals, and Billie was solemnly feeding the menagerie by turns with grass, when suddenly Dora's quick brown eyes opened wider, and she bent eagerly forward to look at a tall figure looming up in the shadowy twilight the other side of the gate.

"Look!" she whispered, softly, pointing at the sudden apparition. "There's the prince." And before any one could stop her, she sprang up and called out. "Whatcher got?"

"Doughnuts and milk," came back the ready response. "I'm Rob Rogers. Father said you'd all be hungry. Can I come in?"

Could he come in!

Billie turned a somersault on the grass and shouted,

"Well I guess! Come ahead! Bring on your doughnuts and milk;" while there was a general stampede as the tall figure came up the path with a pitcher of milk in one hand, and a big pan filled with rich brown doughnuts in the other. "The honest and truly ones," Dora said, "with a

hole in the middle." The stranger was very shy, though, under the volley of questions and the effusive welcome of the menagerie, and even Muggins' warm invitation to stay could not keep him.

"Come back to-morrow," called Dora, between mouthfuls, as he turned to go. "Sure pop."

"All right," Rob answered, laughingly. "Mother says you are all to come over to our place for breakfast. First house down the road it is. Good-night, all."

"Good-night. We'll come," shouted Billie, and Marjorie felt happier than she had since they had come to the nest.

For an hour after Rob's departure the six Rattletibangers cared little about anything else in the world as they made Mrs. Rogers' doughnuts disappear, and drained the last drop of sweet country milk; but at last the feast was finished. As they started to go indoors, the Lion was missed, and after considerable skirmishing Avis found him rolled up like a kitten under the lilacs fast asleep with his little Jap doll clasped loyally in his arms, side by side with a half eaten doughnut. Billie carried him into the house, and so the first night began, and the princess had come to her own.

CHAPTER III

Princes in Disguise

PROMPTLY at six by Marjorie's little silver watch hanging up in the kitchen for a clock, Billie paraded back and forth through the entry banging on the milk pan with his fist.

"Everybody get up and hustle," he called, and the rest answered to the call nobly.

The walk down the road to the Rogers' farm was short, and the warm welcome that awaited the children was so hearty from Mr. Rogers, and so motherly from his wife, that Marjorie knew she had two true friends on whose kindness she could rely.

"Land, child," said Rob's mother, her rosy face beaming around on the circle of hungry faces about the breakfast table. "You're no better than a brood of goslings without a mother. Who on earth is going to teach you how to swim through life?"

"Muggins," said Dora, promptly, and although she laughed with the rest over Dora's answer, yet when she looked at Marjorie's steady brown eyes,

and loving ways, Mrs. Rogers thought Dora might be right after all. After breakfast, Rob harnessed Sinbad, his own handsome bay, to a light wagon, and Marjorie made a list, with Mrs. Rogers' help, of all the groceries she would need to start house-keeping with, so that the boys could bring them from town for her, and they drove off together, the best of friends.

"Aren't the Rogerses nice?" asked Dora, when the girls walked back home. They had a generous basket of eggs and butter, and on top of these a cook-book.

"You'll need it before you get through," Mrs. Rogers had said, when she laid it there.

"Mr. Rogers is so little and cunning," Dora went on in her rattling happy-go-lucky way. "He looks just like Santa Claus, and Rob's a darling. He promised me some pigeons and bantams, and rabbits, and said he'd help me climb up to the crow's nest in that big walnut-tree down by their barn. My, but isn't he tall? Billie says you could tie a knot in him, and then he wouldn't be too short."

It was great fun in fixing up Rook's Nest, as they all called it. The packing cases were opened in the yard, and after the house was cleared of dust and cobwebs, the treasurers from the old home were transferred to the new one. With fresh

white curtains at the windows, and pretty familiar pictures hung around on the walls, the place commenced to wear quite a different aspect. A ribbon tidy here, and a soft dainty pillow there, placed by Avis' tasty fingers, gave quite an attractive air to the bare lonely rooms, and the girls felt wonderfully encouraged when at last they sat down and surveyed their work.

The long "L" room was to take the place of the schoolroom at home, and already the special corners were arranged. Hop Sing and Cripple hung in their cages at the windows. The three little white beds of the menageries stood around like doll beds, and Avis had set up her little desk and bookcase, trying to forget the piano she loved so well. But best of all, they unanimously declared was "mother's corner." That was Avis' idea, and she had carried out her plan with great success. The rosewood desk was there, and a picture of the dear mother hung above it, and then came the willow chair with the stool for her feet, and lastly her work-basket;—the high one of fancy straw and wood with slim prettily carved legs, and queer little hanging bags around the sides for thread and buttons, and all the multitude of odds and ends that found a peaceful resting-place in mother's work-basket.

"I think we have fixed a place for every one

now," Marjorie said, counting off the places on her fingers. "Dora, Winnie, and Reggie in the school-room in their own beds; you and I, Avis, will have the four poster, and Billie will have to sleep on the lounge in the sitting-room."

"That's all very nice for us," the Lamb returned, from her perch on the window-sill, "but Billie won't have any place for his bugs or his books or anything. I think it's mean."

"No, it is not, dear," said Avis, calmly. "Billie is the man of the house, and must make the best of everything."

"Well, I don't care," murmured Dora, rebelliously, "it isn't fair, and p'raps Billie and I'll go off and build a house all by our ownselves. Then you'll be sorry you didn't treat him well. We could build a better one than this, any day."

"Mutiny! Mutiny!" cried Marjorie, catching up the rebel in her arms. "Let's lower her down the well until she promises to be good."

"I won't," screamed Dora. "Let me go."

"Promise?"

"No, sir-ree bob, I'll go with Billie if he goes," gasped the Lamb, in lusty defiance, though she was being borne in disgrace to the well, but all at once there was a sound of wheels, and she screamed,

"Bil-lee!"

Whereupon two gallant knights rushed to the

rescue of beauty in distress, and after a brief, but fiery fray, bore her from the enemy in triumph.

"Of course we'll build a house," Billie replied to Dora's eager questioning, "and we won't tell a soul where it is, either. That's the way to settle these prime ministers who think that they can make heads of families sleep on common lounges. Not much."

The prime ministers did not notice the threat. They were too busy looking over the bundles of provisions which Rob handed down from the wagon. With their slender store of money they had not dared to indulge in even the mildest luxuries, but still the little stock seemed quite plentiful and tempting when it was all nicely arranged in the small pantry off the kitchen.

"If you need anything come right over to our place," Rob said to Marjorie. "Mother will do anything for you."

"Oh, we'll come fast enough," interposed Billie, with suspicious eagerness. "Just wait until we've sampled Muggins' cooking, then we'll see whether it leaves us dead or alive, and if it kills us, why, we'll begin life over again with you."

Rob laughed. He was standing by the kitchen door with the Lion on his shoulder, and Marjorie glanced at the two with a quick bright smile. She liked this tall, overgrown boy, with his soft dark

eyes, and quiet voice. He held the little chap as tenderly as she herself could have done, she thought; and the look in his eyes, a steady, resolute look, and the way he held his head—as if he were not afraid of anything in the whole world, made her agree with Mr. Rogers. Rob was certainly a likely boy.

“Can’t you stay to dinner with us, Rob?” she asked.

“No, thanks,” he said, with a glance at his soiled hands and dusty clothes. “You don’t want to begin feeding tramps so soon.”

“Oh, go on,” Billie said, in a low tone of encouragement. “Muggins won’t care.”

“No,” Rob answered, turning away, and setting the Lion down carefully. “But perhaps the other one would. Good-bye.”

Billie looked after him in a puzzled way as he drove off. Then he put his hands in his pockets and whistled softly for a few minutes before he got the case clearly in his head.

“Say, Avis.”

Avis turned from the table she was sitting to look enquiringly at the head pushed through the window.

“Have you been putting on airs with Rob?”

“Certainly not,” answered her royal highness, with dignity. “I have not spoken to him at all.”

"Oh, that's it, is it?" groaned Billie. "Been treating him as if he were a walking clothes-pole, or a stray lightning-rod, haven't you? Just a shadow in your royal highness's path, eh? Avis Randall, do you know you make me tired? Now, you needn't get huffy, 'cause you do. Can't act with common politeness to a boy 'cause he milks cows and wears overalls. Who was it brought you doughnuts and milk when you were starving on old apple blossoms?"

"Billie, if you knew how silly you looked bobbing your head, and reading the riot act, you'd stop," said Marjorie, laughing heartily at the two. So the matter was let rest, and the first meal they had eaten in the new house was despatched in a general "jollification," as Billie called it.

The days passed on, and Marjorie's heart grew lighter and more hopeful as she saw how happy her little colony was. Rob was a regular visitor at the Nest, and a very welcome one too. It was he who helped Billie clear away the weeds from the yard, and cut the high straggly grass into a semblance of order. It was he, too, who taught them how to begin their gardening; and he and Muggins worked over the slips and cuttings and seeds that Mrs. Rogers sent over, until Marjorie was as brown and as tanned as the boys.

Avis would not touch gardening. It made her

hands so rough and dirty, and besides, one had to touch worms and creeping things, so she would take her sketch-book, or a favorite author from her little library hoard, and go off by herself to the riverside or ravine to dream, and play princess, Billie explained scornfully.

They were brave dreams, though, for Avis was the genius of the family, the said family had always agreed ever since she was as small as the Lion. While Muggins had been busy as a bee, looking after the sick father and caring for the invalid mother, Avis had studied and dreamed and lingered now over her piano, now over her sketching, now over her stories, ever looking forward to the great day when she should win fame and fortune and play fairy godmother to the whole Randall brood. But, in the meanwhile, she thought out wonderful plots and scribbled off wonderful tales, and wasted her substance in copy-paper and stamps, and then sat down, and waited and hoped, and spent the money they were sure to bring over and over again in her mind, and then one day, the postman would bring a long envelope with a business head on it, and there would be the dear discarded child of her fancy accompanied by the neat frosty little line of refusal, and Avis would weep a little, storm a little at the wretched taste of editors, and then just take Billie's advice to

grin and bear it, and build new air castles when the old ones faded into cloudland.

But she was a genius. There was no doubt about that, Muggins would say, and so even if she lacked the world's verdict of fame, she was the laurel-crowned queen of poetry and fiction at home, and never lacked an appreciative audience. The schoolroom had been the shrine of the Muses at the old home, and now at the little Nest, the "L" room took its place. Day after day, Avis spent some time at the desk in the south window, dreaming and writing at stories that were to thrill the world, but, as Billie said, "the world didn't thrill worth a cent," and the practical youth even hinted that he thought it would be a good deal more to her royal highness's credit if she helped Muggins wash dishes, and mend stockings. However, Avis always gracefully ignored his little hints as beneath her notice, and when they became too pointed, she simply took refuge in the ravines.

Sometimes the Owl would go, too, but generally she liked to be with Reggie, and Avis said that he was too much trouble to take.

Billie and Dora were acting in a very strange manner. At the end of the yard, just where the slope toward the river began, stood a great old ramshackle barn, large enough to hold three or four houses, the size of Rook's Nest.

Muggins had been too busy to explore it, but Billie and the menagerie had penetrated to its deepest corners, and all at once a mysterious separation had occurred. The rival factions were respectively Billie and the Lamb on the barn side, and Winnie and Reggie on the exiled side. Both had been summarily banished from the new domain a few days after its occupancy by the other two worthies, and neither threats nor prayers availed to recover their lost estate.

"Winifred, where is Dora?" asked Marjorie, about two weeks after the kingdom had become inhabited.

Out in the garden under the apple trees Rob had erected a swing, as a balm for the Owl's wounded spirits, and here she and the Lion spent most of their time.

"I don't know anything about her," Winnie answered, loftily, poising herself on one foot and swaying back and forth. "She and Billie shut themselves up in that old spidery barn, and that's all we see of them."

Marjorie laughed at the aggrieved tone and ran down to the barn. The big loose creaky doors were barred from within, and she called several times before it was opened by Billie, dusty, and towsled haired.

"No fair coming in," he announced, firmly, then called, "it's only Muggins, Dora."

A muffled answer came from the depths beyond, and he continued:

"What doth the princess of Rattletibang Kingdom wish to say unto the lord and lady of the Palace of a Thousand Delights?"

"I want to tell the lady to come and chase her bantams out of my garden right away," replied Marjorie, decidedly.

"Aha!" and Billie knit his lordly brow in deep abstraction. "So the imperial birds have wandered, have they? 'Tis well. We will reclaim them, Princess."

"Hurry up, Dora," called Marjorie, as she turned away, and she fired a parting shot at the Palace of a Thousand Delights. "If your imperial birds do any more damage to my pansy beds I shall make potpie of them."

"Do you believe she means that, honest and true?" asked Dora, anxiously, scrambling out from a pile of hay up in the loft.

Billie shook his head, and seated himself on a meal box.

"We're going to have a mighty hard time of it to keep this a secret," he said, gravely, "the girls are just hopping wild to see what we've got in here, and Winnie"——

"Winnie, indeed!" and the valiant Lamb gave a sniff of disdain. "If you're afraid of *children*,

Billie, you can leave the whole thing, and I'll ask Rob to help me. I don't care what you do."

Billie glowered at her in high dudgeon.

"I do believe for a fact, Dora Randall, that you think Rob's smarter'n I am."

Dora sat on the edge of the loft and dangled her feet carelessly down, while she pegged corn kernels at the gloomy lord of the palace.

"I like him because he never gets huffy like you do," she replied, teasingly. "What if they do try to find out our secret? Can't we draw up the ladder here, and beat them all to pieces just the same as if it were a real palace with a drawbridge, and everything? Billie, you're a duffer."

"I'm not," blustered Billie.

"Oh, yes, you are, too, William," Dora replied, calmly, "the dufferest duffer I ever saw"——

Such imputations were unbearable. Billie sprang up and made a frantic dive for the ladder, thirsting for vengeance, but before he could touch it, it rose in the air above his head, hoisted by the Lamb, who thereupon sat calmly down on her drawbridge, and smiled at him pityingly.

"Never touched me!"

"You're afraid," taunted Billie, but she shook her head.

"I only wanted to show you how easy it is to keep any one from coming up here," she said.

"Yes, but we could starve if Muggins thought of a seige," began Billie, dubiously, when all at once Marjorie put her head in the doorway.

"Bantam potpie for dinner!" she called, and, taking the hint, the lord and lady of the Palace of a Thousand Delights hastened to the rescue of the imperial birds, and shut them up in their coop.

"We're going to have an understanding on this matter," Avis said, at dinner time when Billie and Dora rushed in late as usual. "You two go off, day after day"——

"In that old spidery barn," added Winnie.

"An' chathe uth out," came the Lion's plaintive tones.

"And forget to do your share of the work," Marjorie concluded, trying to look severe. The culprits exchanged glances, but did not reply to the charge, and after dinner they strolled back to the barn arm in arm.

"I wish that we could find out what they are doing up there," the Owl said, regretfully.

Two days had passed by, and still the mystery of the Palace remained unsolved. The lord and lady were brimful of some great secret, and missed the call to dinner and supper regularly. It was after dinner, and the girls were washing up the dishes. Since the desertion of the Lamb, Avis had assisted at this latter function.

"So do I," replied Marjorie. "I'm afraid that Dora will fall from those high beams and hurt herself, you know, Avis."

"Small danger, I guess," Avis returned, rolling her sleeves up daintly. "She climbs trees and fences like a cat. You should have seen that Rogers' boy and she up in the walnut-tree yesterday. He makes a worse tomboy of her than Billie does. I don't believe they can get into much mischief."

But Muggins looked anxious.

"I am going to find out this afternoon," she said, slowly. "We'll all break into the barn and capture it."

"It's too warm to get excited over nothing," Avis said, idly.

"Oh, won't you help us, please, Avie," and the Owl's face was all puckered for a cry.

"No, dear," replied her royal highness, decidedly. "I don't care about racing all over that old barn, and besides, I want to finish my chapter."

"You've always got an old chapter to finish," Winnie murmured, wistfully.

"Well, I want to let down the hem of my white dress, too," added Avis.

Marjorie's face sobered in a moment, and she sighed.

"It's a shame, Avis," she said, impetuously,

"when you are so pretty and nice and different from the rest of us, for you to have to bother over such things."

Avis laughed in her low gentle way, and took a fleeting look at herself in the little cracked mirror. Fair, long hair that was never rumped or untidy, but fell in two even braids down her back. A sweet, refined face, "just like mamma's," Marjorie always said, and soft blue eyes that were ever ready to gaze off at day dreams or air castles. She was tall, too, tall, and graceful as a princess ought to be in all reason, whereas Muggins was small and slender, without an atom of dignity about her. Someway, no matter how much house work Avis did, she was just the same, cool and fresh, and sweet. But with Muggins it was ever short brown curls flying helter-skelter, the big all enveloping apron which she would insist upon wearing, seemed especially devised to catch every speck of dust and grime from the whole castle, and her arms and hands and face were tanned like a gypsy's from working in the garden. And the only untidy thing about her royal highness was the second finger on her right hand. This Billie gloried in for it always wore a fine, largely developed blot, a sign manual of her trade, he said.

She looked at Marjorie now, and there was a

shade of grateful tenderness in her voice as she answered :

"You have to bother about a hundred and one things, Marjorie, of much more importance than a white dress. Why shouldn't I? You don't want to keep me around for an ornament, do you?"

"Oh, no, no, it isn't that," Marjorie answered, vigorously, as she paused to talk, a plate elevated in one hand, and the dish-cloth in the other. "I mean that you ought to have been born some one who only had to look lovely all the time, just born to float around in a star-ship"——

"What's that?" asked Avis, laughingly.

"Oh, I don't know exactly, only it would look like a star and sail through the sky with cute little slaves fanning you, and flowers all piled around for you to lie on. Then there would be a prince in disguise"——

"How would I know that he was a prince if he were in disguise?"

"Well, you would just know because you couldn't help knowing, and that's all," replied Marjorie, emphatically. "Princes are princes no matter whether they're in velvet or rags. He would love you for your golden hair, and something wonderful would happen, of course, probably a griffin would carry you off, and then the prince would have to rescue you and bear you to a palace of pearl and crystal

where you could live on ice-cream and chocolate caramels all the time, and be happy ever after. And I would be the fairy godmother and say, 'bless you, my children.' "

"It would be better than a Rook's Nest, anyway," said Avis, thoughtfully, looking out of the low window at the wilderness of trees and tangle of wild flowers and climbing vines. "I wish the prince would come."

"Here's Rob!" called Winifred, poking her head in for a second at the kitchen door before she scampered down the path after the fleeing form of the Lion.

Muggins laughed as Avis turned from the window.

"It's only that Rogers' boy," she said, sedately, picking up the dish-towel to wipe the rest of the dishes.

"But he may be a prince in disguise, all the same," laughed Marjorie; then to Rob as he came into sight: "Hello, stranger. Where have you been for two whole days?"

Rob leaned over the window-sill with Reggie clinging to his neck, and nodded pleasantly.

"We've been pretty busy," he answered, "on account of mother's boarder. It's the new minister over at the chapel, Mr. Keith. I only stopped to-day on my way to town, to say hello."

"Billie is sure to want to see you," replied Muggins, "can't you come in?"

"No, thanks. Let go my neck, old gentleman."

"Tickle him, Rob. *Hard*, under his arms," Winnie advised, wisely, and upon the advice being followed, the Lion surrendered unconditionally.

"I wonder if he is very old," Avis said, after Rob had gone.

"About eighteen, Billie told me, eighteen or nineteen."

"Who? The new minister?"

Marjorie looked up at Avis' startled face, and burst out laughing.

"Oh, no, no, I mean Rob," she said, when she could speak.

"I believe that Rob Rogers has turned every head in the castle except mine," returned Avis.

"You show him that pretty well," and there was a decided rebuke implied in Marjorie's tone.

Avis shut her lips in a close firm line, and hung the towels on the line outside the door with great deliberateness. It was not until she had taken off her apron and was about to leave the room that she spoke.

"I don't care whether he knows it or not. He's just a big, common awkward country boy, and I don't think boys like that are nice. I'm not a

tomboy like Dora, or a dear good angel like you, Marjorie, and I don't like folks for friends who have cows and things to look after, and—and aren't neat. So there."

Marjorie stood speechless during the outburst, and after Avis was gone, she turned to the door at a slight noise there. It was Rob.

"I forgot to tell you that mother says you can have a couple of quarts of milk every night just as well as not," he said, looking with the same pleasant steady smile at her flushed shamed face.

"Oh, Rob, I'm so sorry," Muggins cried, extending her hands, impulsively, "I know that she did not mean"—

"That's all right, Margie," answered Rob, cheerfully. "I guess probably she's right."

"But it isn't so"—

"Oh, yes, it is," laughed Rob, as he turned to go. "I'm not as neat as one of your princes. Good-bye."

Marjorie sat down on the door-step to think hard. She was deeply, truly sorry that Rob should have heard Avis' words, and she felt as if she would like to shake some of the "airs," as Billie called them, out of her. Avis was so queer about some things. She had said once that people who were really nice at heart could not help

being nice in their manners, and nice to Avis meant looking as if you had just been touched with Cinderella's wand, and were perfect from head to foot.

That way of looking at the case troubled Marjorie. She had known so many people whom she had thought extremely nice, and yet who did not faint if their hands weren't always lily-white like Avis'; then again it seemed to her that there had been something lacking in some of those whom Avis declared so "nice, and neat, and well bred." It may have been the free-hearted kindliness, the unfailing readiness to lend a helping hand, the frank, cheery good-will that they lacked; she could not tell quite all she missed, but they made her think of bubbles floating in the sunshine, all beautiful, changing colors, and glittering lights, and then, pouf! there was nothing to them but light and air which a breath blew away.

Now Rob Rogers was really a very nice boy; she had thought so from the first evening when he had come with the milk and doughnuts, and she still thought so, in spite of Avis.

"When are you going to the barn, Muggins?" called Winnie from the swing.

Marjorie gave a last sigh over Avis' queerness, and rose from the step.

"Right away," she returned, and started to

rally her forces, for this charge of the Rattletibangers against the Palace of the Thousand Delights was to be an event in the history of Rook's Nest.

CHAPTER IV

The Palace of a Thousand Delights

It was a warm, bright afternoon, and the lilacs along the wall afforded safe ambush for the attacking party. No weapons were allowed. It was to be a bloodless victory of right against might.

The three bold warriors crept in single file behind the lilacs' friendly shelter to the shady side of the barn. Here stood an old empty water trough, moss-grown and rickety, just under the windows of the stall, and one by one Muggins dropped her army through a window while she stood on the trough, and then the gallant commander herself squeezed through. When all three stood at last in the barn, they clasped each other's hands for mutual support, and listened for sounds of the enemy.

A good many shingles were missing from the roof, and the sunshine sifted down through broad cracks here and there, making highways of golden dust motes from roof to floor.

Against the loft stood the ladder, and Dora's

hat hung on the top. While Winnie and Reggie hid in the stall, Muggins removed her shoes, and slipped on a pair of rubbers she had brought. Noiselessly she stole around past the feed boxes, and harness corner, through the little gate which led from the stalls to the broad space under the loft, and so to the foot of the ladder, when just as she raised it, the hat tumbled, and at the sound, a shrill cry of alarm came from the loft.

There was a rush of feet overhead, a series of thrilling warwhoops from the lord of the Palace, and the ladder was seized from above.

"Winifred, come help me quick!" cried Muggins, laughing, and clinging to the ladder, and the reserves responded nobly.

There was a brief but wildly exciting struggle for possession. Billie hung on like grim death, his feet braced against a board in the floor of the loft, while the Lamb lent her strength to the cause by tying a rope around the defender, and securing the other end to a side beam, so that, should his powers prove unavailing, he would not be carried over the Palace walls with the fall of the drawbridge, and thus fall a prey to the enemy.

The Roaring Lion became utterly unmanageable in his headstrong zeal, for while the girls were holding down the strategic key to the stronghold, he valiantly attempted the scaling of the walls

alone, and was only deterred from ascending the ladder while the latter was swaying in mid air by prompt and strenuous action on the part of Muggins.

At last, however, the citadel fell, the ladder was borne in triumph to the stalls, and the lord and lady of the Palace retired, uncrushed by defeat, and vowing untold vengeance.

"We've got you now!" cried the Lion, fairly dancing with joy. "You can't come down."

"Well, just you try coming up," Billie retorted, defiantly; then to Dora in a hushed undertone: "That's what we've got to do, keep them from coming up."

"They've got the ladder," answered the Lamb, gloomily.

"Never mind. Help to pile a lot of hay over there near the edge, and get some corn to peg at them, and say, let's set the Enchanted Goblin free?"

There was a confidence expressed in the last suggestion that instantly reassured Dora, and preparations for the defense began at once. When all was ready, the two sat still and awaited developments.

A subdued giggle came now and then from the stalls, but at last even these ceased, and it was evident that a new surprise was being planned.

When the ladder disappeared, Billie pondered and Dora looked worried. They heard the back door swing open, then came a smothered sound of scuffling, and all was still again.

"I wonder what they will do next," whispered the Lamb, lying at full length to try to peer through the cracks, but Billie's attention was fixed on the big front doors. They were being pushed and shaken as though some one were trying to get in.

"There they are!" he said, excitedly, "they're trying to get in that way."

All at once there was the sound of quiet footsteps under the loft coming from the back entrance.

"Here they come," whispered Billie. "Give them the whole thing now."

Just as the steps came beneath he pushed over the stack of hay. Immediately Dora followed with a shower of corn, and then more hay from Billie, and then more corn, and lastly, Billie set free the great white owl which he and Rob had caught one day in the barn, and with big frightened eyes, and flapping wings, it fluttered helplessly after the hay and corn, and the two bold defenders danced in howling glee about the loft, at the frantic scrambling and muffled cries for help that rose from below. All at once the great window at the side of the loft was banged open,

and there on the ladder were Muggins, the Lion and Winifred, all ready to make a grand onslaught.

The noise below went on.

Billie and Dora looked at each other in horrified dismay.

If the enemy were there on the ladder, whom had they smothered under the hay?

"It's only Avis," Dora faltered, "or—or Rob."

"What's the matter?" cried Muggins, gaily, holding her skirts about her for a jump, and then suddenly she stopped, staring with wide startled eyes at the barn floor. She was much higher up than Billie or Dora, and had a fine view of the scene below, so when they saw the change in her expression they went to the edge in guilty fear, and hand in hand, peered over.

There was not the slightest question about the invader's being completely vanquished. He was more. He was overwhelmed. He stood just below the loft, hatless and coatless, struggling with corn and hayseeds that had lodged in his hair, his ears, and down his collar. Where there was no corn there was hay, and where there was no hay there was corn, and the Enchanted Goblin had left the marks of its claws on his hands and face.

"It isn't Rob," said Dora, in an awestruck whisper.

"Not even a tramp," gasped Billie, and as the

stranger glanced up to see where the hidden foe was, his eyes rested on the big window where Muggins stood like a new kind of angel ready to take a drop to earth.

"How do you do?" he said, with a pleasant laugh. "I didn't know that you expected a caller. I guess there is some mistake."

"I—I don't know," began Muggins, looking helplessly from him to Billie, when the latter came courageously to the rescue.

"I thought you were Muggins, you know," he said, confidentially.

"Well, whoever Muggins is, he or she has my hearty sympathy," replied the stranger, his hearty laugh sounding strangely in the old barn, "and I think that Muggins owes me a debt of gratitude for bearing Muggins' punishment."

"That's Muggins up there," Billie explained, with his most winning air of frankness, pointing to the window. "Who are you?"

"Oh, Billie, don't be so rude," said Muggins, her face flushing hotly.

"That's all right, Miss Muggins," returned the newcomer, "he has a right to ask. I am the new minister at the chapel and my name is Keith."

"Just plain Keith or Mr. Keith?" asked Dora, with friendly interest.

"Allyn Keith," he replied.

"Wait a minute," said Billie, "and we'll all come down, Mr. Keith."

Muggins had already vanished from the window, and Dora followed Billie down the ladder in very undignified haste to do the honors of the place to the new rector.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Billie, apologetically, when he had shaken hands with Mr. Keith and helped him to get rid of some of the hay and corn. "We were having a fight, you know, and you came right where we expected Muggins to come."

Mr. Keith laughed, and declared that it did not make a bit of difference, that on the whole he rather enjoyed the joke himself.

Billie scrutinized him approvingly. He was young and smooth-faced, with dark-grey eyes, and fair wavy hair, "just a leetle red, as if it had been, and then changed its mind," Dora said afterward. His eye-glasses had been knocked off in the scuffle with the Enchanted Goblin, but Billie found them uninjured, and when he had replaced them and stopped laughing, Mr. Keith presented quite a clerical appearance.

"Pretty jolly sort, for a minister," Billie inwardly decided, and liked the clergyman on the spot.

Avis stood in the garden, cool and fresh, in her pretty clean lawn dress. She had been sewing

The Palace of a Thousand Delights 65

under the trees when Mr. Keith came to call, and when he had asked for Miss Randall, she had said that her sister was in the barn, and he had insisted upon seeking her himself. There was an amused little twinkle in Avis' soft eyes when she met him on his return with Billie and Dora, one on each side.

"Did you find her, Mr. Keith?" she asked, innocently.

"No, not Miss Randall," he replied. "I found only these two, and plenty of hay to lavish on unoffending strangers or on Muggins."

"Oh, Muggins is Miss Randall," Billie hastened to explain.

Mr. Keith looked surprised and puzzled.

"Muggins—the little brown-eyed girl at the window—Miss Randall?" he said.

"Yes, that's Muggins," Dora said, "Marjorie Cherrington Randall, and this whole place is hers, and she is Princess of the Castle."

"What castle?" enquired Mr. Keith.

"Castle Rattletibang," replied the Lamb, promptly, "and Billie and I are Lord and Lady of the Palace of a Thousand Delights, and that's the barn."

"Well, my lady, if that is one of the delights you greeted me with, you may keep the other nine hundred and ninety-nine," said Mr. Keith, as he

turned to look at Marjorie coming up the path. She had stopped to put on her shoes, and though her hair was flying after a fashion all its own, and hay-wisps were plentiful all over her dress, still there was something about the erect head, and straight earnest gaze of her brown eyes, that made Mr. Keith change his opinion of Muggins.

"I am stopping at the Rogers farm," he said, when they were all seated unceremoniously on the grass in the garden, "and I want to begin calling on my parishioners at once."

"You're pretty young to be a minister, aren't you?" Dora asked. "You don't look a bit like old Mr. Thurston at the church where we used to go; does he, Muggins?"

Mr. Keith shielded Muggins' embarrassment by a quick reply, and after further talk about the little chapel, and a promise from all to attend its services, he rose to depart.

"Ask him," whispered Dora, nudging Billie mysteriously. Billie looked doubtful a moment, but finally acquiesced.

"Say, if you aren't too busy to-morrow, come over here. We're going to have a jollification—a regular circus, you know, in the barn, I mean the Palace, and we want you to see the fun, too."

"I will come, surely," replied Mr. Keith, as he took his leave.

"How nice it will be to have a little church so near," Marjorie said that night. The two girls were sitting in their nightgowns, combing their hair. It had always been their favorite time for a comfortable chat of mingled confidences and exchanged opinions, and to-night Avis was brighter than usual.

"I think it will be splendid," she answered, emphatically. "Isn't Mr Keith nice?"

"Pretty nice. He took the joke well. Billie says some folks would have been tearing mad."

"Not a clergyman," Avis returned, serenely, "and," after a pause, "how different he is from Rob Rogers."

Marjorie felt slightly nettled over the comparison, and her curls were pulled hard as she answered slowly:

"Well, for my part, I don't know. If you mean that Rob doesn't wear eye-glasses, nor a long clerical coat, why then I suppose he's different, but if you mean it the other way, Avis, I'd have to see the two hearts together to tell for sure. Good-night."

"Good-night," said Avis, gently. "You know you said yourself that princes came in queer disguises."

"Oh, do go to sleep, you girls in there," called Billie, sleepily. "How do you suppose a fellow

can get to sleep with you two going it like sixty. To be continued in the morning."

Muggins threw a pillow at the grumbler, which was instantly returned with fervor, and then the castle was quiet for the night, though its princess lay awake long, thinking hard over many things.

CHAPTER V

The Circus Queen

"Now, then, Billie," Muggins said at the breakfast-table the following morning, "I want to know why you invited Mr. Keith here to-day? If you think that he will be allowed to see any of Dora's or your wild performances, why, you're mistaken," and she shook her head at the smiling youth opposite her, "I don't intend that the new minister shall be shocked at us so soon, sir."

Billie beamed on her in pitying tolerance.

"Never you mind, Muggins," he returned, blandly. "At three sharp we open the doors and you may all come in then; but you won't know a blessed thing beforehand, not if the court knows itself."

Rob was in the secret, at least, so the Owl announced, after she and Reggie had sat in patient anticipation on the side fence all the morning watching the barn, for they had at last been rewarded by the sight of Rob mounted on Sinbad, making his way by stealth to the Palace. This latter edifice was securely guarded against assault

now, for the ladder had been recovered by the Lamb's forethought in the excitement of the previous afternoon, and the whole place was impregnable.

About noon, Rob went back to the farm, and returned with old Uncle Tom, Mr. Rogers' ancient gray, warranted harmless, Billie had said; and the curiosity of the watchers on the fence rose to fever heat at the muffled sounds of stamping and thumping which followed.

Luncheon came, and with it two dishevelled, wearied mortals who looked as if they had been through the wars, but emerged gloriously triumphant. Afterward Billie rushed to the house for newspapers and a paper of tacks, and Marjorie was just in time to catch him stealing the hoops off the rain barrel.

"But I got three, all the same," he said, exultantly, on his return to the palace. "Just the right size."

At half-past two Mr. Keith came.

"Whatever happens, I want you to know beforehand that we are perfectly guiltless," Muggins told him, her brown eyes full of suppressed merriment, when he found she and Avis out in the garden awaiting the summons.

Mr. Keith laughingly agreed to reserve all criticism for the Lamb and Billie, and, as he spoke,

his eyes glanced from the figure swaying idly to and fro in Winnie's swing, to the little one leaning against the tree trunk, and Marjorie flushed as she read his thought.

"Every one thinks Avis is older than I," she said, impulsively, answering his unspoken thought. "She is so dignified, you know, and taller, too, but then she is clever, and it always seems to me as if clever people were older than just ordinary folks."

"Clever?" repeated Mr. Keith, regarding Avis in mock dismay. "Anything startling?"

"Oh, no, not yet," Muggins answered, hastily, wondering how Avis could look so cool and disinterested under the ordeal. "She paints a little, and plays a little, and writes—oh, whole piles, as Billie says. And some day"——

"The greatest show on earth is now about to begin!" shouted a stentorian voice from the barn as the great doors swung slowly open as if moved by invisible agency. "Step right up, ladies and gentlemen. Get your tickets before the rush! Don't push!"

There was a frantic rush from the fence as the Owl and Lion started on a perfect gallop for the barn, and the rest followed more slowly.

"Everybody sit where they can find a seat," called Billie, from the back of the loft, when the

audience entered. "Mr. Keith, take the meal-box."

Avis shared the mealbox with the clergyman, and the two children climbed to the tops of the stall posts, as box seats. Marjorie insisted upon standing, "so as to be ready when they break their necks," she said.

"There will be three parts to this show," announced Rob, appearing on the edge of the loft, his violin tucked under one arm, and a huge bouquet of lilacs spreading itself over his shoulder. "All who desire to see the side show will please climb the ladder, and come up here"——

"I want to thee the thide thow," called the Lion, starting to scramble down from the post, but Winnie clung to his collar, and his sudden ardor cooled rapidly under stress of circumstances.

"The regular circus will take place in the ring"—continued Rob.

"Whereth the wing?" asked Reggie, mildly.

"Right in front of you, young man," replied the ringmaster, severely. "If you would use your eyes as well as you do your tongue, you would see it. And I want to say right here, that the wild unicorn from the Sahara dines daily on youths of tender years, nice dainty, succulent youths like a certain person present."

Here the Lion evinced an urgent desire to get

near Muggins, and it was with some difficulty that order was restored.

"Lastly," Rob started in once more. "Last, but far the least, ladies and gentlemen, there will be a wild west show after the regular performance, held in the adjoining prairie. Now, all who wish to see the side show step right this way."

A large tin pan was at this point handed out to the ringmaster, and he beat a tom-tom on it while he declaimed in a high pitched tone :

"Come and see the living George and Martha Washington ! Climb the ladder and see the only educated spiders in existence ! Come right up and talk to the wild girl of Jamboree, and witness her marvelous taming of the Wolligog"—

"Whatth the Wolligog?" gasped the Lion, his innocent blue eyes widening as he drew back suspiciously from the ladder.

"The Wolligog is the largest polliwog in existence," replied Rob, gravely. "Don't miss the only chance of a lifetime to view the only white owl that Noah let out of the ark, the wild and woolly Enchanted Goblin. Step this way to the side show !"

The ladder was climbed by all, and Billie was waiting eagerly to show his treasures to the crowd. Their name was legion, too. One corner of the loft had been planked in so as to hide its contents

from any one below, and here was the secret domain of the Lamb, and her bold comrade, here was the treasure chamber of the Palace of a Thousand Delights.

On a board at one side was a long array of Billie's bugs. Very particular was he, too, as to their mode of death and arrangement thereafter. The Lamb was never allowed to kill a specimen for the simple reason that she "squashed" the anatomy beyond recognition. Now Billie prided himself on his ways and means of execution, and had certain special ones for certain specimens; so that, when their spirit had fled and transfixed by a deadly pin, each served to fill a place in some of the many boxes that were their tombs, they still retained that loveliness of form which had been theirs when in the flesh.

There were butterflies in abundance, from great, scalloped-winged, orange-spotted beauties down to tiny dots in pale yellow and blue.

Then came the moths, and of these the humming-bird moth was king, and the rest but sober-garbed servitors; and then there were beetles and gold bugs, and all manner of things that creep and crawl and fly, things without law or reason for being except that they are dainty and perfect, and love their brief life as much as William loved his.

After the specimens came the birds, and here Muggins spoke her mind freely. It was a shame to cage the dear, beautiful creatures, she declared, and shut them up in that old barn, and Billie hovered about uneasily as he saw the tender pity in her eyes when she spoke to his prize bluejay with its handsome topnot, and to the crow that was just learning to whistle, for he knew that Muggins would speedily find a way to set them free.

There were two owls, the big white one, and a little one with a red bronze plumage, and tufts on his head like horns.

"That's the Enchanted Goblin," Dora said, "and the little fellow's a wizard in disguise. Billie read that owl wizards didn't have any heart, and if they did have one, whoever eat it became a wizard, and he wanted to kill Toots and cut him all up, and eat his heart."

"Why, Billie," exclaimed Avis, "I don't think that's nice."

"'Fraid I'd know more than your royal highness?" Billie queried, with a grin, as he went on to the cage of the red and gray squirrels. These and the woodchuck had come from Rob's store of pets, and were left severely alone since two sharp slim teeth had found a resting-place in Dora's thumb when she tried to show her love for a "dear little chipmunk."

"I don't see your educated spiders, Billie," Mr. Keith said.

Billie had forgotten all about them, it appeared, but they were there all the same, and Dora reached under some boxes, and drew forth two bottles, chunky, round-topped bottles with a large spider in each. Such plump, speckled, ferocious-eyed fellows, too.

"We caught them up in a corner of the barn," Billie explained, "and some day we're going to take the corks out, and let them fight. Rob says they fight like stags, get a good grip and hang on till they die. What do you think of the side show?"

"I want to thee the wild girl and the thnaketh," Reggie said, wistfully.

"That's me," cried Dora, climbing hastily up on top of a barrel. "Bring forth my Wolligog!"

The keeper of the Wolligog at once passed a small box up to the wild girl of Jamboree, and, amidst breathless excitement, she opened it, and produced the Wolligog, a tiny black garter snake, not more than three inches long, with a band of bright yellow about his neck.

"This wonderful creature," Rob began, knocking for order, "possesses the strange power, ladies and gentlemen, of increasing or decreasing his size at will. At times he becomes a per-

fect giant, as tall as a—a—what did you say, Dora?"

"As a telegraph pole," replied the wild girl, promptly.

"Yes, exactly so, as a telegraph pole, while at other times he is the size you now see him. It is impossible to explain this marvelous power, and if any one doubts our word they are earnestly requested to remain and wait until his snakeship takes it into his head to swell."

"I want to thee him thwell, Billie," announced the Lion, hopefully, but it suddenly appeared that his snakeship never would swell to the size of a telegraph pole when little boys with blue eyes and yellow curls were around, and every one went down-stairs again so as to be in time for the grand entrée.

The ring was a large enclosure on the main floor of the barn. At the back of it were the stalls, and there was a wide entrance between. Above, wide wooden beams stretched from the loft to the side of the barn, and from two of these hung two home-made trapezes at which Marjorie looked askance, with visions of flying leaps and broken bones in her mind's eye.

Rob descended from the loft, and stood on a box in the centre of the ring.

"All ready!" he shouted, raising his violin to

his throat, and at the sound of music, the stall door was banged violently open, and with stately tread and flowing mane, Sinbad paced slowly in with Billie on his back

Billie? Not so. Not common, everyday Billie, but a beetle-browed ferocious looking border ruffian with Rob's big broad brimmed farm hat perched rakishly on the back of his head, its crown wreathed in goose quills and rooster feathers. Slung carelessly across his saddle bow was Mr. Rogers' old rusty shot gun that had made many a crow or hawk give up the ghost, and up and down each side of his blue overalls were ribbon bows of divers colors fastened on in Mexican cowboy style.

Even Sinbad was in festal array with balls of yellow dandelions dangling in his mane, and a wreath about his arched neck.

The music ceased. The rider halted his noble charger before the box, and Rob began his little say.

"This, ladies and gentlemen, is the far-famed scout and terror of the plains, Deadshot Billie, likewise known throughout the West as Rattlebox Bill, Woolly Willie, Billie the Buster, etc., etc., etc. If the youth of tender years feels his yellow locks rising in apprehension, and thereupon feels called upon to make a demonstration and interrupt this

show, Deadshot Billie shall perforate his slender form with bold, bad bullets, that's all."

The howl that had trembled on the Lion's lip as he heard of the terror of the plains died away, and he stared at the apparition in tense silence.

"Deadshot Billie," went on the ringmaster, "has gone through escapades which raise the hair on end. Six times has the dauntless hero been scalped, four times burned at the stake, and scores of times been left for dead on the field of many a border battle, riddled with bullets at the hands of the savage redmen. But still he lives to wield his deadly weapon that has never been known to miss the mark of his eagle eye. The two large boxes which he draws after him contain the trophies of his victories. In one he carries two thousand and forty-one bullets taken from his own body under the most exciting circumstances, while the other contains no less than three thousand, sixty-five and a half front teeth won in gallant fights from Indians. The savage custom of scalping, Deadshot Billie disdains. The victim of his rifle is merely called upon to render up one lone tooth as a proof of his death. Billie, kindly shake the boxes for the public so that they may hear the teeth and bullets rattle, and all doubts be dispelled, as I fancy I heard a sneering laugh from the lady on the mealbox."

The bold scout graciously jerked the rope attached to the soap boxes he trailed behind him, and they at once gave forth a deep-toned rattle that quite satisfied the public.

"Our Wild West Show," continued Rob, "is under the entire direction and control of Deadshot Billie, and he will himself give a special exhibition of taming a bucking broncho, of lassoing the fierce buffalo on his native plains, and of holding a band of Apaches at bay in a canyon gorge. Don't fail to see this thrilling part of the performance."

"We won't," called the Lion, reassuringly, and the wild west hero rode about the ring three times, waved his gun, lifted his sombrero in graceful salute to the ladies, and retired.

"The next appearance will be the \$10,000 Beauty," shouted Rob, "mounted on the only snow-white unicorn in captivity. The Beauty was stolen by Turks when but a child, and was rescued by the gallant gentleman who has just left us."

"Has he got the Turk's tooth?" asked Winnie, interestedly.

"Yes, ma'am, he has, and the unicorn was lassoed by Deadshot Billie on the desert of Sahara."

The violin struck up a regular breakdown melody, and in came old Uncle Tom with his slow lumbering gait, dignified, and a trifle resentful of



"THE UNICORN WOULDN'T RUN IF YOU SHOT OFF FIREWORKS
UNDER HIM"

the pranks played upon him. The boys had strapped an old ox horn on his forehead, and on his back sat the Lamb in all her glory. She had on one of Marjorie's long skirts, a red calico one, and Avis' pet silk sash wound about her head for a turban. She was very rosy and elated, this \$10,000 Beauty, and as for riding the fiery unicorn, from the desert of Sahara! Why, it seemed that that was but one of the little recreations she took before breakfast.

"Up with the hoops!" cried the ringmaster, dropping his violin, and seizing the rain barrel hoops covered with newspapers.

"Oh, Rob, I'm afraid she'll fall," Marjorie exclaimed, as the Lamb rose slowly to her feet, and balanced herself on Uncle Tom's broad back.

"No, she won't, either," Rob said, calmly, "the unicorn wouldn't run if you shot off fireworks under him. Please don't disturb the performance, madam."

The hoops were raised. The ringmaster yelled "Hi! Hi!" and poked the unicorn in the ribs until he consented to move forward. Under the first hoop he stopped. There was a thrilling moment of suspense as the paper ripped and the Beauty thrust her head through. One arm and a foot followed with cautious deliberation, then their mates, and lo! the fair circus queen stood once

more on the back of her fiery steed, smiling and unharmed, and kissing her hand in response to the deafening applause.

Just here a trifling delay occurred, as it required the united efforts of Beauty and ringmaster to awaken the unicorn, and coax his straying hoofs to the next hoop, but at last all three were shattered, and the lady retired with fearless mien, albeit with a very red face, and a much disarranged turban.

Brilliant acts followed in quick succession. The audience rose as one and cheered lustily when Signor Slipporino dangled recklessly from the trapeze, or playfully twined one leg around the bar and swung to and fro, tempting providence in a new way. To be sure the Signor bore a slight resemblance to Deadshot Billie, but it was not so very noticeable.

The "Cherry Act" was announced as a feat of fearful daring. The Signor hung by his knees, and caught cherries in his mouth again and again, and, after a little by-play, the Circassian girl stood on her hands and caught those thrown by the Signor, but her hair became so unmanageable that she had to retire precipitately, and the ringmaster said there would now be an intermission, after which the Wild West Show would commence.

"Why don't you do something hard?" asked Winnie, mildly. She and the Lion had penetrated "behind the scenes" in order to see exactly how matters stood.

Dora did not deign to reply. She pretended to be exceedingly busy folding up Avis' scarf, and it was not until the two had gone that she told Billie of the taunt.

"Why didn't they do something hard?"

The two performers stood and gazed at each other in moody silence, and then the vials of Billie's wrath broke forth. The very idea, when for days and days, they had been practicing the wonderful feats. Perhaps she thought it was easy to wriggle around a trapeze bar. Billie supposed that she had an idea that riding a horse was like rolling off a log. You just did it, that was all. Very well. He would show her. He would run with Sinbad. He would gallop madly. Perhaps he would even jump the fence.

"Yes, but what shall I do?" asked the Lamb, dolefully.

"You can ride on Tom all the time."

"I don't want to ride on that old thing. I want to ride on something that might run if it took a notion to," she replied, crossly.

"Well, you can't have Sinbad, so that settles it," Billie said, decidedly. "He—he's kind of

dangerous, and I promised Rob to keep a tight rein on him, you know. Don't you want to come out and see me lasso the scarecrow?"

No, she did not. She did not care a bit about old scarecrows. She could lasso them herself. It appeared that the only thing in the world that she wanted was something to ride that could go like sixty and frighten the wits out of the Owl and the Lion.

"Good-bye," Deadshot Billie called, pleasantly, casting a look over his shoulder at the mournful little figure against the stall, as he rode out on Sinbad to open the Wild West Show.

Dora went over to the door and peeped out. Everybody was sitting out under the trees in the meadow on the shady side of the barn watching the terror of the plains in his fierce charges at the scarecrow. She thought hard for a moment, and then stole back to the barn, and a moment later the \$10,000 Beauty could have been seen racing over the fields the other side of the Palace far out of sight from the spectators.

It had been the very first week at Rook's Nest, when Dora had discovered the charm of a certain pasture down by the river. One day, on a journey of exploration, she and Billie had gone thus far, and had started across lots, when, all at once, a long-legged, shaggy coated object had sprung up

from the shade of a big oak, and was off like the wind at sight of them.

"Whoa!" howled Billie, as he dashed off in hot pursuit. "Deer."

"No, sir-ree," Dora had said, calmly, as she watched the chase, "plain everyday colt."

But that same plain everyday colt had given them many a wild chase, and it was a long time before she had made a chum of him. Now, however, he knew her as such a one as himself, a jolly, rollicking comrade, and when she called him to-day, he came tearing at a break-neck pace across the field to her, and Dora felt a thrill of delight.

She had certainly found something that could run.

"Come along, dear, precious, darling childie," she said, lovingly, and put her arm about his rough neck, and so she led him on to the barn, coaxing and petting him all the way.

Then Darling was fed some of the sweetest clover, from the edge of the water-trough, and before he knew what had happened to him, Dora had sprung on the trough and was astride his back, both hands clutching his mane.

There was a single instant of astonishment on the part of Darling, and then he bolted. Luckily the bars were down, and he made straight for the

meadow, as Dora had intended he should. The Wild West Show was in full blast when the colt shot in like a streak of greased lightning, and there was a frantic stampede for a place of shelter.

The Lamb was frightened. She could not have denied it this time. Her heart was pumping inside of her like a gigantic clock ticking, but she set her teeth, and tried to think it was fun.

At the very first bound she had thrown herself forward on Darling's neck, and with her arms clasped about his neck, and her knees gripping his sides, she rode like a little Indian.

"Let him alone," she screamed, as Rob flung off his coat, "I'm all right."

But Rob thought differently.

"Hang on," he called to her. "Put up the bars, Billie."

But the bold terror of the plains was unfit for further action. Sinbad had reared and plunged aside when the wild creature had darted by him, and Deadshot Billie had landed in the easiest manner possible on a grassy resting-place.

Mr. Keith turned to the bars, but it was already too late. Once around the meadow Darling saw the open way, and was through it and racing toward the home pasture as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Rob!"

It was Marjorie's voice, and the tone of appeal that decided Rob. He had vaulted on Sinbad in an instant, took the fence neatly, and was off, while the rest stood motionless. At first it looked as if he would not reach the runaways, but the shorter cut over the fence had helped him, and he was within two lengths of the colt when the latter shied quickly to escape his pursuer, and when he started again he was riderless and something very still lay on the grass, a little limp something that Rob raised tenderly in his arms and bore back to Marjorie when the sober-faced group hastened to meet him.

"Is she"— Marjorie's voice choked, and she could not ask the awful question, but Mr. Keith knew what she meant, and shook his head.

"No, no, not as bad as that," he said, gently, laying one hand on Dora's wrist. "She has fainted, that is all, I trust."

Something in the last two words made the girls' hearts sink with fear, and they followed Rob to the house with white anxious faces.

"I'll go for the doctor on Sinbad, Margie," Rob said, when he had laid Dora on the lounge. "Don't worry."

Avis turned to watch him as he galloped off on Sinbad, and queer conflicting thoughts came in her mind about "that Rogers' boy."

"Why didn't you do something?" she asked Billie, when he came in on tiptoe, his face screwed up with anxious solicitude for his comrade, the poor little circus queen.

"Gee whiz! What could I do?" he demanded, explosively. "Wasn't I scared stiff? Did you want me to chase her on the unicorn?"

"N-no, but, Bob," began Avis, but Billie opened his eyes at once.

"Oho! So it's Rob, now, is it?" he cried. "Now that he hustled off like a hero and distinguished himself, you'll speak well of him, won't you? Well, say, let me tell you something, your royal highness of the Imperial Ink Blot, I think you're a duffer, and if Rob makes up with you after the way you treated him, he'll be a bigger duffer yet. But say," as he turned away without speaking, "bet you five cookies he doesn't make up."

CHAPTER VI

Day Dreams and Air Castles

"THREE weeks at least before she can walk, and probably it will be longer," was Dr. Tilton's parting word, and there was at once a voice heard in Ramah, lifted up in lamentations that would not be comforted, for, as Billie was not in the room, Dora laid her head on Marjorie's shoulder and had a good cry over the verdict. Her left ankle was badly sprained, and for Marjorie's part she was thankful that the injury was no greater. But the Lamb was rebellious over the close confinement right in the midst of good times. When Billie entered, however, she was defiant and confident still.

"Want a little colt ride?" asked Billie, cheerily.

"You wait until my foot gets well again, and see whether I do or not," Dora retorted. "If he hadn't stumbled I could have held on."

"Well, you hollered, anyway."

"'Cause I was having such a good time."

Billie nodded his head wisely, his eyes on the bandaged ankle.

"Maybe you'll holler another way pretty soon," he said, mysteriously, "and it won't be for fun, neither."

"Never mind, childie," Muggins said, lovingly, pressing her cheek to the circus queen's pale freckled one. "We'll all help you to have a good time so that you won't get blue or lonesome."

And they all kept the promise. Such jolly hours as passed now in the little old sitting-room. Rob and Mr. Keith came over every night to help amuse the sufferer. The violin was never forgotten, and at the command of Dora, he brought his sketches also. Such comical sketches of the farm, and animals and Billie and all the rest of them, bright, perfect little character bits done to the life with a few hasty strokes of his pencil.

"Father says it's nonsense," Rob would say, laughingly, when Muggins and the girls praised his work. "He says I'd a sight better be spending my time learning to farm than scribbling."

For even big, whole-souled Rob had his troubles, but he only told them to his mother, and Muggins. Many a quiet little confidence passed in the dim old kitchen at the Nest, with Marjorie mending socks or cooking, and Rob standing in the doorway, telling her of how he wanted his life to go. After all, he would say, father could not understand how he could love the farm, and love

the beautiful open country and all that, and yet not want to spend life in the quiet routine of sowing and reaping, year in and year out.

"I want to go to the city," Rob would say, stretching out his big strong arms with a smile as if he were going to battle. "I will go surely—some day."

And Marjorie would nod and agree, and tell him how proud of him they all would be when he became a famous artist.

But these June days were too full of delight to make plans or bother about the future. Who would worry over a career when the roses were flashing out in yellow and pink and deep red from every corner? And when the birds were fairly singing themselves mad over the joy of living, and the sky ever a deep, wondrous blue, spreading over all? Then there were the evenings, and the long twilight time that came before darkness, and this was the time when the invalid held her court. Rob would play on his violin, and the rest would sit in the dark room at dusk listening to Dora's favorites, over and over, and some of his own, too, sometimes, and outside the hollyhocks, white and yellow and deep pink with red hearts, would nod in at the windows, and to Marjorie all the world seemed so happy and bright, just a glorious place to live in, that was all.

Then such a store of new riddles as Mr. Keith would bring, and such fairy stories as he told, with Winifred on one knee and Reggie on the other. All the inhabitants of the Nest liked Allyn Keith; he was young and boyish, and yet firm, too.

The Sunday after his call, all save Dora and Muggins, had gone to service at the chapel, and had declared it the nicest little church that they had ever seen. Avis played the organ now. It was the substitute for her loved piano; and on week days when she was missed, Marjorie always knew she could be found in the quiet sunlit church, her hands straying lovingly over the keys, and her face lifted to where the stained glass above the altar caught the sunshine, and threw it down in rainbows of purple and red and gold.

Marjorie noticed that Rob was far more particular about his appearance than he had formerly been; but, although he would laugh and talk freely enough when he was with her or the children, as soon as her royal highness appeared, he would turn silent and find a quick excuse for leaving, and Billie gloated over it, and told Avis every day he had won those five cookies all right.

So the weeks passed, and still Dora's ankle was far from being well, and the Lamb fussed and

worried until Mr. Keith named her the "maiden all forlorn."

"I don't care what you call me," Dora murmured, dismally, giving her pillow a vigorous thump, and pressing her face down on it. "You are all having such a happy time, and here I am shut up in the house day after day."

Billie had made up a new riddle that he tried on every one.

"What is it that Dora is that she isn't?"

It never failed to mystify the victim, and no one had ever been able to guess it. After a proper delay he would explain.

"Why, she's a patient, you see, only she isn't patient, you know. See the joke?"

The Owl and the Lion brought all their treasures willingly and laid them as a tender votive offering at the Lamb's feet, and Billie was installed as chief clown of the court, rising to the demands of his exalted position nobly.

The imperial fowls were brought in daily to pay their homage to her ladyship, and when Martha Washington had laid her first egg, it was poached, and served in state on toast for the Lamb's dainty repast.

Mrs. Rogers sent dainties every day by Rob, but still the invalid fussed and fidgeted, and rebelled until at last Billie hit upon a plan for

amusing her, and passing the time. Secret consultations were held between him and Rob, and after a couple of days they set to work.

"What on earth are you going to do, boys?" Marjorie asked, when she saw them carefully measuring the distance from the loft window in the barn to the side window of the sitting-room beside which Dora lay on the lounge.

"Never you mind, princess," said Billie, loftily. "This doesn't concern you castle dwellers at all. Just you wait and see."

After they had measured the distance, Rob produced a new ball of strong waxed twine, and Marjorie's workbasket was rifled of two large empty spools which once had had basting thread on them, but had been saved to serve as wheels for a new state carriage which the Lion had in his mind's eye for one of his doll family. Reggie, however, was altogether too much interested in the mysterious thing which was being constructed, to resent the loss.

When Rob appeared at her window and started to hammer hooks into the woodwork, Dora at once wanted to know what was going on; but her questions were met by a stolid indifference which set her ladyship nearly frantic. Securely held by the hooks, one of the spools revolved on an axis made of one of Mrs. Rogers' knitting needles,

sacrificed for the good of the cause. Up at the barn window Billie had performed a similar operation, and now, after frequent struggles with interfering lilac bushes, and apple trees, the twine was strung over the two spools.

"It looks like a telegraph line, doesn't it?" said Dora, excitedly, as she squinted one eye to trace the course of the string over the tree tops.

Billie smiled in a knowing way, and winked solemnly, as he started after Rob for the barn.

"Watch the line," was all he said, and they did watch, with all their might, Winnie and the Lion sitting under the window with their eyes fixed on the slender lines, and indoors beside Dora stood Avis and Marjorie, as eager as the little ones to see what the surprise of the boys might be. Not a word was spoken. The suspense was getting awful, when all at once the Lion shouted ;

"Here it cometh ! Here it cometh !"

A swift something shot down the line from the barn, and stopped with a rebounding bump at Dora's window.

"Why, it's only a box," she said, eyeing it gingerly.

"Open it, goosie, open it," said Marjorie, laughing at her hesitation. So Dora reached out her hand and removed the cover from the little tin box that had come over the lines. There was only

a piece of paper folded inside, and a flash of disappointment showed in her face as she opened it, and read in Billie's large, sprawling handwriting.

"To the Captive of the Castle : Greeting. Have heard of your falling into the hands of the enemy. Will fight soon. Palace of T. D. O. K. Answer by secret cable. Lord William."

"Oh, what fun," exclaimed the Lamb, when she had finished, her eyes bright with happiness over the new novelty. "Give me a pencil, somebody, quick."

A pencil was at hand, and in a minute a reply was sent back to the anxious watchers at the Palace, while the Lion danced for joy as the little box sped on its way.

"To Lord William : Salutations," thus ran the answer. "Lots of fun. Wire often. Wish I could be sent in the box. Can furnish plan of Castle any time you want to storm it. Where is the Wolligog? Lady Lambkin."

"Hurrah!" shouted Billie, when he had read it aloud. "She caught on all right. You next, Rob."

So the next message was from Rob, and the soul of the fair captive was exceeding glad, when she saw it.

"To the Beautiful Tamer of Coal Black Colts. Dungeon 1001, Castle Rattletibang: Wolligog

seized by the Blue Dwarfs of Crystal Cave. Wants witch spell from you at once. Will change himself into a dynamite bomb, and blow up the cave. Where will he be after the explosion? Answer quick. General Red Rover."

A long drawn "Ah—h—h," came from the little group of listeners, and the Owl cried eagerly :

"Oh, tell him quick not to let the Wolligog explode, Dora, 'cause there wouldn't be anything left, you know."

The Wolligog's fate being thus settled, the wire flashed back :

"No dynamite. Send Enchanted Goblin to the rescue. See that wild colt is captured. Give him griffin wings and a saddle of thistle-down for me to escape on. Lady Lambkin."

Back and forth all the afternoon went the little box, and the exciting news which it bore of thrilling adventures on sea, land, and air, got the poor captive lady into a very turbulent state of mind. Finally they grew so marvelous that Winnie, as the lovely Fairy Kissabelle sent some on her own account. Red Rover wired in haste :

"Fairy Kissabella, Caramel Castle, Sunshineville, Skyland : Lady Lambkin starving in dungeon. Advise by return box."

"To His Most Esteemed Highness, Red Rover, Palace of a Thousand Delights : Give her beetles'

tongues powdered on rose petal salad. Also leg of grasshopper served with a boiled currant. Send my diamond wand at once. Kissabelle."

"In haste. Diamond wand stolen by pixies. Will wire special goblin police to pursue robbers. R. R."

"Supper now ready," called Marjorie from the kitchen, while the rest were breathlessly awaiting the return of the Goblin police.

"Just a minute, just a minute more, Muggins," pleaded the Owl. "Wait till we get one more, please."

So the cook herself came to witness the climax, and this time the box came more slowly as if weighted with an unusually large cargo.

"It's heavy," Dora cried, wonderingly, and she took off the cover as if she expected the spring of a jack-in-the-box. The telegram was there, but there was something else, a queer little black something that hid itself as far as possible in a corner at sight of all the eager eyes staring down on it. Dora seized the telegram and read excitedly:

"To the Lady Lambkin. Wolligog rescued. Terrible battle. Enclosed please find pixie king. Taken captive and enchanted. Do not break spell. Red Rover."

"Don't you know what it is, girls?" Billie cried, bursting enthusiastically into the room. "It's

a turtle, just a little fellow for a cent. Rob found him down on a log on the river bank. Isn't he a dandy?"

Dora raised the royal captive out of the box, and held him on the palm of her hand. Such a tiny chap he was, not much larger than half a dollar, with bright eyes and out stretched head.

"What shall I do with him?" Dora asked, helplessly, and Billie laughed aloud at the display of ignorance. Did she think turtles were kept in cages to sit on a perch and sing like canaries? Perhaps she wanted to dress him up in doll clothes, and hold him in her arms to rock to sleep. He wouldn't be surprised at anything the Lamb did, only, as a gentle hint in favor of saving the pixie king's life he would suggest a bowl filled with water, and having some sand in the bottom, and a plentiful diet of flies to tempt the pixie king's dainty appetite. All of which was done, and the bowl placed on the window-sill at the Lamb's elbow, where she could exchange confidences with her new pet. So it came to pass that, between operating the secret cable, and catching flies on the window pane for the unlimited desire of the pixie king, the days of captivity passed faster for the fair lady of the Palace, and she was kept from absolutely pining in her castle dungeon; until, when July came, it brought the day when she was

to go out once more—not just to be brought out into the garden to sit there and watch the others have a good time, but the day when she could walk and run again like the same old Dora.

It was to be on Saturday afternoon, and Muggins was hurrying with all her household duties as fast as she could so as to give her undivided attention to the recovered circus queen.

“Say, Muggins,” Billie said, in a low, confidential tone as he paused at the kitchen door. “Just keep the lamb quiet, will you, and out of sight of the back road through the fields. We’ve got a secret.”

“Oh, you’re always fussing over a secret,” laughed Marjoric, as she looked up, flushed and warm from the baking. “I suppose Bob’s in it, too.”

“Course he is,” returned Billie, heartily, then he added, with a winning smile meant to touch the heart of the cook: “If there is one thing on earth I love to eat right off as soon as it’s cooked, it’s gingerbread. Do you cut your gingerbread when it’s hot, old lady?”

“I do when it’s for two such treasures as you boys,” said the cook, willingly, and Billie went off toward the river with two generous squares of rich golden brown gingerbread in his hands, just hot from the oven.

"How you spoil those boys," came a low, easy voice from the open window of the "ell," where Avis' yellow hair showed above the writing-desk. She was finishing a chapter, as usual, or beginning one, and the spirit of the Muse was on her in full force, therefore she had retired early in the morning, taking sanctuary in the school-room afar from her house work and all distracting events. This last story was to be a master-piece. There was no doubt about it in her mind or in Marjorie's either. Every day her royal highness added to it, and every night after the rest were asleep she read it to Marjorie as they sat under the shadow of the big four-poster in their night gowns.

"Can't spoil a good thing," Muggins replied, merrily, piling the cooking dishes in the dish pan, and starting for the tea kettle. "I'd give them anything they wanted if I could."

"A gun that shoots for Billie, and an art education for Rob," Avis said, idly, balancing her pen on her finger. Muggins looked up with a look of frank astonishment.

"How did you know Rob wanted an art education?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know; I think I heard Billie telling the Lamb, or else you said something about it," and her royal highness did not meet the

straight gaze of the brown eyes at the kitchen window.

Muggins whistled. It was another one of the bad habits she had learned from Billie, but she did not say anything.

"I think it's so queer," Avis went on, thoughtfully, "the idea of a big, awkward farm boy like that wanting an art education. It seems so hard that anyone should have an ambition of that kind in them when it is impossible for them to win it—when they have no money."

Her voice sank lower and lower, and the last words Marjorie just caught faintly, but a quick look of anxiety shone in her eyes, and she asked impulsively :

"Aren't you happy here, Avis dear?"

The head at the ell window vanished, and in another moment its owner was in the kitchen.

"I'll help you with those dishes," she said, taking the towel from Muggins' hand. "Where did the boys go?"

"I don't know and don't care a rap about it," replied Muggins, briefly, "I want to know whether you are happy here?"

There was a silence for some time, and at last Avis said in her firm, womanly way :

"No, dear, I am not. I do not care for the things you love to do. I hate house work and I

hate all the miserable little scrimping and saving we have to do to get along. I want to make a great success of my writing. I want to make you all rich, and give you something better than this tumble down little place. I want—oh, Margie, how can I make you understand how much I want, and why I am not happy.”

Marjorie looked at her in silence, looked at her with a mingled love and disappointment that she could not conceal. And yet she knew it was all true, too, and perhaps that knowledge hurt worse than if only the fear of its being true had been in her heart. Happy? Why, she never thought about whether she was happy or not, any more than she did about whether she was alive or not. It was simply a sure thing. She had grown to love the little “tumble down place,” as home, their very own home, and then there were the little ones, too, the menagerie, to love and care for. She never had time to sit and wonder whether she was happy or not. But of course, it was all so different with Avis. She was clever.

“Say, Muggins,” came Dora’s plaintive tones from the sitting-room, “when can I come out?”

“When I get the work done, girly,” said Marjorie, with a little half sigh.

“Haven’t you anything to say to me?” asked Avis, raising her dreamy eyes with a look of re-

proach. Marjorie had always supported her loyally before. She had thought she would understand. She did not know how her words had hurt.

"No, not a single thing," Marjorie said, shaking her head, "you are different from the rest of us—I suppose you can't help it, so I haven't anything to say. Go away and write. I'd rather do the work alone."

Avis went, and stayed as much as ten minutes, but somehow the Muse was shy, and evaded her, and in her place came up the memory of Marjorie's face as she had looked at her.

At last she rose and took up the book of Tennyson lying at her hand, and went back to the kitchen, where Muggins was down on her hands and knees cleaning up the floor. She never would allow Avis to do any of that sort of work because it made her hands red, so it had been the established custom in the past for her royal highness to draw a chair up in the entry way so as not to touch the clean floor, and there she would sit in state, darning stockings, and reading poetry aloud from a volume on her lap. But to-day Marjorie did not look up when she heard the chair put in its accustomed place, and Avis hesitated. At last after another glance at the slim little figure down on the floor scrubbing for dear life, she said:

"Last time we read 'The Coming of Arthur,' but it was so long, you know. I'm going to try some of the shorter ones to-day."

Still there was no reply, and she opened the book and began to read. The old wooden clock that Rob had sent over to them from his store of useful curiosities, ticked steadily on, many times, and still the low, sweet voice read on, and still Muggins said not a word. Finally, though, she stopped abruptly, and sat back, her hands clasped around her knees.

"Billie ought to go to school," she said, solemnly.

"Well?" Avis looked up inquiringly.

"Well," Marjorie repeated, "I'm wondering what I am going to do. And I'm wondering, too, what we are going to do when the last of the money is gone."

"Marjorie, dear, don't you be a bit afraid, a way will come," said Avis. "I never bother about those little things. Listen to this, the rest about the mermaid and the bold merry mermen :

"They would sue me, and woo me, and flatter me,
In the purple twilights under the sea ;
But the king of them all should carry me,
Woo me, and win me, and marry me"—

"Oh, I don't like that," said Marjorie, scrubbing

hard. "She was so silly with her flowing ringlets and her sea bud crown. Skip it."

"I don't think she was silly—for a mermaid," Avis answered, dreamily. "Of course you would never do such things, but I would. Think of yourself, Muggins, on a great throne, with the sea snake coiled around for love of you"—

"Ugh!" said Marjorie, shaking back her curls with a shiver, "no, I thank you."

"Or think of Rob Rogers chasing around, playing tag with the mermaids, 'in the purple twilight under the sea,'" Avis smiled as she spoke, and Muggins' ire promptly rose in defense of her favorite.

"I don't care," she said, warmly, "he tried to save Dora when the rest of us couldn't stir, and he's a splendid boy, and I don't think you have any reason for being so—so silly, Avis."

"Silly?" Avis rose from the chair. Silly? She silly? It was too much.

"Yes, ma'am, silly," said Muggins, firmly, and she would have gone on but for a gesture of warning from Avis as the latter beat a hasty retreat.

"Hello, Margie," Rob said, his head and shoulders appearing at the window. "Is Dora ready?"

"Yes, sir-ree," called that maiden all forlorn. "I've been waiting for Muggins and Avis to get through scrapping"—

"Dora," Marjorie interrupted, hastily, but the Lamb ignored her.

"Scrapping, that's what Billie and I call it, and now, what have you got behind you?"

"You march out here, and find out," called Billie, from the yard, and accordingly his companion accepted the invitation and marched.

And lo! The colt, the fiery, untamed colt, gentle and docile as a kitten, standing in all humility at the doorstep, with a saddle and bridle on, and his shaggy coat trim and satiny.

"What's it for?" gasped the Lamb, reaching out her hand to pat the slim, pretty nose.

"For the Lady Lambkin with the love and best wishes of her old friend, Mr. Benjamin Rogers," said Rob, gravely. "Father thought you had the best right to him. Come up."

It was a great moment for Dora. She stepped from the doorstep to Rob's hand, and so mounted to the saddle, and instead of the wild break for liberty which Darling had made on a similar occasion, he lifted his head proudly and walked with dainty, careful steps down the pathway to the road, Rob following on Sinbad.

When they had passed out of sight, Billie turned to the girls with a quizzical look.

"Did he tell you?" he asked, shortly.

Marjorie's gaze, which still rested lovingly on

the last bend of the path, returned to his face in surprise.

"Tell what?" she said, and her royal highness was turning away, when Billie's words made her pause.

"Oh, nothing much," he said, gloomily, as he thrust his hands into his pockets, and turned his head away so that they could not see his face. "Only—only Rob's going off next week to try his luck in the world, and I guess we're going to miss him some."

CHAPTER VII

The Black Pirate Sails

IT was not one of Billie's jokes, as Muggins half believed at first, but all quite true. Rob was to go away to Chicago to study drawing and sketching—art, as Avis called it; and then began a period of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth on the part of the menagerie for Red Rover, the hero of their hearts. The Owl and the Lion tagged after him devotedly whenever there was a shadow of a chance, and Dora shed many a tear on Darling's rough mane in the privacy of the barn.

But Billie and Muggins displayed far different sentiments. Not but what they were sorry to have Rob go, only they were sorry in a gloriously self-sacrificing, Spartan spirit; for was not the Red Rover going forth to battle, the hardest battle of all to fight, the battle of life? Then how silly it was to cry about it, Billie told the Lamb. He only wished that he were in Rob's shoes, going away off to the city to hustle and get rich.

"Yes, and perhaps we'll never see him again at all," Dora said, dismally, her face woe begone and

her nose red as a cherry. Dora never looked nice when she cried. Now when the Owl wept, there were just a few little tear drops that trickled down her cheeks like dew on lily petals, and she looked sweeter and daintier than ever for the shower; but when the Lamb wept, she wept in a wild, abandoned, tempestuous fashion, which played havoc with her rosy countenance made for smiles and dimples. Her eyelids were red, her nose was red, and her cheeks flushed and wet, and all she needed was sackcloth and ashes in order to start a little wailing-place of her own just on the strength of her appearance.

Billie stood and looked at her now, in dark browed disapproval, his feet wide apart, his hands deep in his pockets.

"Dora, you haven't caught on," he said, at last, shaking his head. "You don't see the point. Now, look here, if there were a great big balloon out in this yard all ready to go up as soon as you cut the rope, wouldn't you go?"

"Yes, 'course I would," returned the Lamb, stoutly. Never should it be said that fear held her back from any deed of daring. "But I wouldn't want you or Rob or Muggins to go, 'cause you might tumble. Don't you see?"

Billie's look changed to one of mild compassion.

"You can't help it, Dora," he said, with a patient sigh. "You can chum with me all you want to, climb trees, chase bugs, and holler, and do all those things, and you can keep a secret, too; but you're only a girl, and you can't help it. You don't care a rap about Rob's being a hero and getting famous so that everybody in the whole world will want his picture and autograph. Of course you don't. You'd rather have him peg away on this old farm all his life, and never do anything better than to draw a picture of Avis trying to climb a ladder; you'd rather have him stay here, I say, just because you want him around. If that isn't like a girl, then I want to know what is! But you can't help it."

Here Dora positively declined discussing the matter any further. She would not be called names by William Randall or any one else.

"Didn't call you names," Billie retorted after the retreating form. "Just called you a girl."

"You called me *only* a girl," said the Lamb, indignantly, "and that's all Winnie is."

"Oh, come back," Billie teased, "I didn't mean that, you know I didn't. You know I think you're a brick" —

But Dora had vanished into the Palace of a Thousand Delights. Only the love of Darling could pour balm on her aching heart.

"I know you will succeed," Marjorie said, the last day when Rob came to the Castle, and her eyes were bright and her smile was brave as she looked up at his figure that took up so much room in the little schoolroom, so tall and stalwart it was, and yet boyish, too, with the frank, earnest face above.

Avis was sitting beside her desk. She had half turned in her chair when Rob entered, and now sat looking at them both, her elbow on the back of the chair, and her cheek on her palm. The desk was overspread with loose sheets of paper, and had quite a business-like air, and, as he spoke to Marjorie, Rob's gaze rested on Avis, on her long, fair hair, her slim, white hands—even the one that held the pen and bore the ever present blot, had an attraction for him—and he wondered if she would say she was sorry he was going away. But she did not. Instead, she looked at him with her thoughtful, blue eyes, and asked:

"Aren't you glad you're going?"

"In a way, yes," Rob said, hesitatingly, wishing she would not say such things; but Avis was not thinking of him or his wishes. She was longing with her whole heart to be in his place, to be going out as he was, to follow her chosen path, and win the treasures it lead to.

Marjorie laughed and chatted with him, and

gave him an immense amount of good advice as she stood beside him, barely reaching to his shoulder; but Avis was silent save when she gave him her hand in her gentle lady-like way, and said good-bye, and then the menagerie rushed in to escort him to the station in mournful state, and the parting was over. The two girls stood in the doorway, and watched the little procession as it passed down the path, the Lion perched high on Rob's shoulder, the girls clinging to his hands, and Billie stalking a little ahead, a bodyguard of one.

Marjorie's eyes slowly filled, and when they were out of sight, she laid her head against the doorway, and was very quiet; but Avis' face was bright and excited, and she said, with a sigh:

"Oh, I wish I were a boy."

So passed Red Rover from out the Nest life, gone forth like a true knight to seek his fortune, and conquer the world, with hopes so great that even her royal highness herself could not have dreamed fairer ones. And very lonesome and commonplace seemed the life at the little house without his ready help and cheery laugh. Even Mr. Keith could not take his place, although he was a constant visitor at the Nest, and a favorite with all.

Billie had all the departed one's pets now. Pigeons, doves, mice, 'possums, squirrels, rabbits; even Sinbad was stalled beside Darling in the Pal-

ace of a Thousand delights as his master had commanded; and altogether the Nest and the Palace had about as large a population as they could support.

It seemed as though Mr. and Mrs. Rogers had adopted the family now that their boy was gone. Not a single day passed but what some thoughtful little offering was sent over from the big farm, and the menagerie waxed fat and joyous on a luxurious fare of cream, and fruit, and many things delightful unto their capricious appetites, and Muggins laughed, and said that they were being bribed from their loyalty to the Nest.

Two whole months had passed by since the night when they had sat under the lilacs and feasted on apple blossoms.

To be sure, not a foot of land on their five acres had yielded any more substantial crop than berries and blossoms; but what did that matter, Billie said. They had rented two acres of pastureland along the creek to Mr. Rogers and he had proved a highly desirable tenant. Butter, milk, and all the treasures of his back garden were at the disposal of Princess Muggins and her brood, and only the lack of ready money ever awakened the Princess to a realization of their true position.

"A slight financial stringency," Billie would say, airily. "That's what Avis says in her stories

about poor folks, and it's great. It makes you feel like a big bankrupt, and as if you had lost millions, instead of a measly ten dollars. We're poor folks, aren't we, Muggins? Poor and needy?"

"Oh, Billie, will you keep still?" pleaded Avis. "I can't concentrate my thoughts at all."

"Ha! Listen to her royal Ink Blotness. There's another beauty. Can't concentrate my thoughts."

William sank into a chair and leaned his brow on his hand as he waved the Lion back majestically.

"Go away, infant. I want to concentrate my thoughts, too," he said, solemnly, and the Lion fled.

"I think it's awful," exclaimed Avis, gathering up her papers in high dudgeon. "You all make fun of my writing and study. It isn't fair at all. Some day"——

"Oh, some day, some day, you may fly away in a soap bubble and frighten the mosquitoes to death," interrupted Billie, loftily. "If you'd stop dreaming about what may happen some day, and wake up to-day, it would be better for all of us. Look at Rob. He doesn't dream."

But Avis had departed, and after a few minutes they saw her going across lots toward the woods with her roll of paper, and a book under her arm. Billie whistled, and Muggins sighed, an anxious pucker of wrinkles between her eyebrows.

"You always say the wrong thing to Avis," she said.

"Don't care if I do," retorted Billie, boldly. "She thinks she's so smart. Thinks she's a little statuette just made to stand on a mantel, and smile and say 'Please keep the dust off.' I love to ruffle her up, and see her act like Rob's bantam when you peg corn at him. All she does is just to shut herself up in that room, and scribble, scratch, scribble, scratch, all day long, and nothing ever comes of it at all, does it? I don't see showers of gold tumbling over her. If she doesn't look out she'll get under the wrong bucket, like that girl in the fairy story you read, and get a shower of pitch instead."

Marjorie, however, would not listen to such talk. Avis was clever, ever so much more clever than the rest of them. It was natural for her to be rather odd. Weren't all clever people odd?

"Yes, but they aren't all cranks, and don't have to concentrate their thoughts all the time;" with which parting shot, Billie stalked away to the barn where the Lamb held sway, to pour forth his sentiments into her sympathetic ear. They were heartily against Avis and her eternal "chapters," and both decided, as always, that Muggins was the only brick.

But the Owl and the Lion were under the lilacs

in the coolest corner of the garden, talking it over in an entirely different light. Avis was nothing more nor less than a fairy princess, Winnie had long since decided. Had she not golden hair and blue eyes just as they always had? Who ever heard of a fairy princess with short, brown curly hair like Muggins. No, Avis was the real one, and Winnie talked and talked to the Lion about it until his eyes grew rounder than ever, and he listened breathlessly.

"You must have a fairy godmother, you know, to be an honest and true princess," the Owl was saying, gravely, "and you never see her, 'cause she's a fairy; but she always looks after you, and sometimes she changes herself into a butterfly or a flower and then you see her, but don't know it's her."

The Lion moved uneasily away from a clover blossom beside him and looked askance at the tiny pale blue butterfly on it. Whenever Winnie told him fairy tales, he was always scared for an hour afterward—for fear he would step on a flower or hurt a butterfly or bee, or something that might be a fairy in disguise. It was very troublesome.

"So I think Avis had one," went on the Owl. "And she's going to be something won-der-ful! And you know how she goes to the woods for so long. Well, I think she sees them there!"

"Theeth what?" inquired Reggie, in an anxious whisper.

"Fairies. All kinds. And they twine flowers in her lovely golden hair, and kiss her, and dance around her." Winnie had closed her eyes, and was rocking herself to and fro, her hands clasped across her knees.

"Leth go an thee, too," suggested the Lion. "Can't we thee, too?"

"Not unless you've got a pink violet, and a ten-leaf clover," replied Winnie, wisely. "And you ought to have a magic bullrush for a wand."

"Leth go find 'em," and there was no resisting the entreaty in the plaintive voice. Winnie always believed faithfully in her own make believes; so now, nothing loath, she prepared to start off in quest of the pink violet, the ten-leaf clover, and the bullrush.

Marjorie was singing in the kitchen at the top of her strong young voice, and never noticed the two figures which started off in Avis' tracks toward the woods down in the deep ravine. The world is wonderful when you only reach as high as the second rail from the top of the bars in the pasture. The daisies come up to your waist, and the low sumac bushes are spreading trees. The two runaways went leisurely past the barn, and on through the pasture. Up at the barn-window sat

Billie and the Lamb, and they saw the two go on and on, and finally climb the fence and go toward the ravine.

"They'll get in the swamp," said Dora, meditatively. "Bet a cookie Muggins doesn't know. I suppose we ought to go after them."

"No, sir-ree bob, we hadn't," replied Billie, firmly. "I want to talk business. Avis is down there somewhere."

So no one disturbed the peaceful tenor of the tramps' way, and Winnie was far too wise to be entrapped in the maze of a bog.

"We'll go down to the river, Reggie," she said, poising herself on a tree stump while they both munched a few stray black raspberries that had rambled over the stone wall on straggling vines. "Maybe we'll take Billie's boat and go 'round to the woods that way."

"You can't wow," returned the Lion, skeptically. "An' then the water'th all gone now. Can't wow wifout water, Winnie."

"We'll just get in, and push the boat with a pole real close to the shore," said the Owl, coaxingly. "I saw Rob do it just before he went away, and there's a little water yet, 'cause Dora and me were down paddling and we could only go half-way across the river."

The vision of pushing the pole all by their

"lonesomes," as Billie called it, was too much for the Lion. He succumbed, and trotted tranquilly after Winnie down to the shore of the river.

When they had first come to East Elmore in the spring, the river had been a great, mighty stretch of dark rain-swollen water, sending turbulent little streams tumbling helter-skelter through the ravines, but now it was midsummer, and it was only a flat, lazy affair, so low that the water grasses and weeds towered rank and thick above the scant foot or two of water, and only the minnows, and black skipping bugs, haunted the sunlit shallows.

"Couldn't get drowned if you stood on your head in that," Billie had said contemptuously, when Muggins suggested it might be a dangerous playground; so now the Owl made a bee-line cross lots for the little willow cove which had been Rob and Billie's boat-house.

The flat-bottomed boat lay as the boys had left it, half in the water, half up on the thick, wet grass. It was a black craft; and on the prow Rob had painted the head of a ferocious looking pirate, with a knife between his teeth, and a handkerchief tied around his head. Beneath this was written "The Black Pirate." Many a gallant cruise had been taken in it across the stormy

main of Fox River, when Red Rover and his trusting comrade, Deadshot Billie, had raised the black flag, and sailed for parts unknown.

"I'm captain," announced Winnie, confidentially, "'cause the captain poles, and you must sit still and make believe you see things."

Reggie's eyes were big with wonder and a touch of fear as he dutifully seated himself on the prow seat, and prepared to watch.

"What mutht I thee, Winnie?" he asked, mildly. "Juth bugth?"

"Oh, my, no. Great big sea serpents wagging their tails at us, and dragons looking cross-eyed from the trees, and—and mermaids with gold shells and pearl combs, and you mustn't call me Winnie. Call me Captain Fairy Rosebud."

So Captain Fairy Rosebud pushed lustily with her pole, and nearly toppled headlong into the river at the first push, but after a time it became easy, and "The Black Pirate" traveled at the rate of three feet per minute.

"Wish we'd find something won-ful," the Owl said, wistfully, when the pole began to grow clumsy and heavy. "Wish something would happen, honest and true."

"Me, too," answered the faithful watcher, plaintively. "I thee another thee therpent."

But the announcement failed to awaken the

enthusiasm from the gallant captain which the first alarm had.

She was leaning meditatively on her pole, looking at the shore line. They were down to the first ravine now, where the miniature canyon ended at the river, and the willows grew thickly all along the banks.

The old boat drifted lazily shoreward, but the gallant captain took no notice of the danger of being stuck in the soft black mud. She was bending forward staring at a clump of willows ahead.

"Reggie," she whispered at last. "Reggie, look there! Don't you see anything? Right down where that big log sticks out."

"Yeth. I do, I do," gasped the Lion, joyously. "Frogth!"

"No, it's not frogs. It's stones. It's—a—it's a cave!"

"An' a thee therpent, Winnie?"

"Reggie Randall, it isn't a make believe this time. It's honest and true." The boat neared the log, and Winnie promptly deserted her post, and started on a voyage of discovery, leaving the Lion alone, indignant but helpless. He watched her as she made her way up the beach a few yards, and saw her disappear behind the willows. Whereupon a howl of exceeding wrath awoke the

echoes, and there was weeping and wailing from the bold pilot, until his shipmate put in her appearance.

But the Owl was wise, and two heads bent close together as she told of her grand discovery, and Reggie was mollified. Then after a few minutes' struggle with the boat line, the two tramped up to the mysterious spot, and vanished, leaving behind no sign of their whereabouts.

CHAPTER VIII

Bread and Berries

MEANWHILE Muggins had finished her work, and, taking the tin berry pails, started for the meadow corners where the blackberries grew. She was thinking deeply all the way, and when she caught sight of a white dress fluttering among the trees, she gave a sigh of relief. Somehow, lately, she had not had as many of the old free confidential heart chats with Avis as formerly. Just whose fault it was, she could not say; but at all events she was glad now of a chance to talk matters over away from the ears of the menagerie.

Avis was throned in clover under a walnut-tree, her papers scattered around her, her hands clasped behind her head, dreaming. When Muggins called her she started and flushed guiltily, then rose with a half sigh.

"Come on and help," Muggins said, happily, pulling her sunbonnet farther over her face, and smiling at Avis out of its shadowy tunnel depth. "Takes lots to go round, you know."

Avis was silent, but there was a worried look on

her face as she knelt beside Muggins and picked the great luscious black beauties from the heavy laden vines which grew along the stone wall. She knew how many it took to go round ;—knew, too, how much harder it was becoming every day to find enough to go round ;—and if it were so now, in the full ripeness of the season's treasures, what would it be in winter? As it was, the summer had fairly flown by, and now it was the time of yellow daisies and ripening apples ; and still there were no crops to be harvested, no signs of any winter store for the six grasshoppers, who danced in the sunshine of the kingdom called Rattletibang.

"We're just living, that's all," Avis said, at last, when they were strolling up from the pasture. "There isn't a single hope ahead for us. What do you suppose we're going to do in that crazy little place when winter comes, and we'll need fires, and all sorts of things?"

"We ought to work some way," Muggins said, in a low tone, her face worried and perplexed.

"We ought to do something," Avis returned, heartily. "I don't know exactly what it is to be, but for one thing, I think that Billie ought to stop spending all his time hunting bugs. What good will it ever do him or us, either? He's off the first thing after breakfast with Dora, and that's all you see of either of them until dinner time, when

they come back crowing over some old beetle or butterfly they've found."

"But he's only a boy, Avis, after all," pleaded Marjorie, "what can they do at home?"

Avis was silent. She carried a pail of berries in one hand, and a willow switch in the other, and as they went along the path she idly beheaded the the tall feathery tipped grasses that nodded lazily on either side.

"I think we've managed pretty well," Marjorie went on. "It's three month's since we came to the Nest, and we've never been hungry yet."

"No, but we would have been if the Rogerses hadn't looked out for us," Avis replied, bluntly. Ever since Rob's departure, she had, as Billie said approvingly, turned over a new leaf. There was less time spent at the desk, and more in the kitchen, and she had taken many burdens off Marjorie's shoulders. The only thing was, that in taking the burdens she wanted to take the authority also, and the menagerie rose in mutiny over the new state of things, for the new task-master was very different from the old one.

"Mrs. Rogers is always sending something over to us," Avis went on, "besides the milk every night."

"I pay for the milk," remonstrated Marjorie, faintly.

"Yes, you pay for it," and there was a fine sarcasm in her royal highness's tone, "you pay three cents for almost four quarts. That's a great price, isn't it? All in the world we have had out of our own place are the eggs and berries and fruit, and we even got the hens from the Rogers farm."

"Oh, Avis, don't talk so," Marjorie raised her head, and tried to look impressive. "The children are happy, and all of them well"——

"And running wild as colts," interrupted Avis, firmly. She rather liked her new role of advising and admonishing Muggins. "Racing about, climbing trees, and nearly breaking their necks."

Marjorie was silent. When Avis once started in to regulate matters, she felt perfectly helpless to stem the tide, so she held her breath, and let it come and go, and generally, after the first burst of enthusiasm, Avis would go and dream awhile, and Marjorie would have her own way just the same.

"And, Muggins dear, we have no more money." Avis hesitated for a moment, but she had made up her mind as to her course, and now she meant to speak.

Marjorie's blue sunbonnet was bent forward to the ground, and her face unseen, but she did not speak.

"Muggins, dear?"

"Yes'm."

"You know that meadow along the riverside?"

No answer, only a nod of the sunbonnet, but Avis persevered bravely.

"Well, of course, it's all your land to do with as you like, but don't you remember that day when we went boating, how old Mr. Rogers said he wished he had that piece of land, and that when you wanted to part with it, you could come to him?"

Another nod of the sunbonnet.

"Well, then, why don't you sell it to him, and take half pay in wood and vegetables for the winter."

Marjorie raised her head and looked Avis squarely in the eyes. There were tears in her own, but her voice was firm and steady as she said :

"I can't do it."

"Why not?" demanded Avis, in surprise. She had thought that her plan was the key to the whole situation.

"Because," Marjorie replied, slowly, "because, in the will that Mr. Ellis showed me, Uncle Cherrington said he left me the house and land here, on condition that I never sold or parted with any portion of it any way, and I won't."

Avis frowned, and switched the heads of some wild carrot blossoms off with an impatient gesture.

"Do you suppose for one moment that he ever thought all of us children would be trying to live in that little place, without any father or mother or money or anything?"

She stopped. Her voice was choked with sobs, and she dropped the pail of berries, and sat down in the tall grass, her face hidden in her arms. Marjorie promptly set her own pail down with due regard for its contents, and knelt beside her, her arms around the other's neck while she waited until she had finished crying.

"Whatever you do," Billie was wont to say in private confidence to Marjorie, "whatever you do, if her royal highness gets to weeping, for pity's sake let her have her weep out, 'cause it will take more of the starch out of her than anything else will."

Following his advice, with the wisdom of past experience to support her, Marjorie waited. Overhead were the branches of an apple-tree, the fruit with which they were laden just beginning to turn ruddy, but neither of the girls glanced above them.

"Avis, I can't, I won't sell a foot of it," Marjorie said, at last, and there was an earnest resolution in her tone that showed how deeply she felt. "It's all we have of our own in the world. Why, I'd rather write to aunt Bethiah Newell than sell the land."

Avis sat up instantly at the sound of the name, and she brushed her tears hastily away from her eyes.

"If you ever did such a thing as that, Marjorie Randall," she cried, "I would never forgive you, never. The idea of doing that after the way they treated poor mamma."

But Marjorie had taken her stand now, and was not one whit afraid to hold her own.

"It was grandpa and uncle Harvey who did it," she said, firmly. "Mamma always said grandma was good to her."

"Yes, but we never heard of aunt Bethiah one way or the other, and now she and uncle Harvey have all the money, and here we are without any. Muggins, Muggins, don't write to them. Do have a little pride."

"Haven't got a bit when it means food and comfort for the little ones to drop it," laughed Marjorie, and then, when she saw the look on Avis's face, her tone changed. "Well, something must be done, I see, that as well as you, dear. While the berries last, we shan't starve, any way. I've got just ten dollars left after paying Dr. Tilton, and buying shoes all 'round, and there isn't a single thing to eat at home except bread. I wish we could all creep into earth holes like moles, and sleep until spring comes." She rose

with a weary little sigh, and, arm in arm, the two went down the pathway out of sight.

Then began a strange manifestation about the apple-tree. First, the boughs were shaken, and some apples fell, then came a sound of scraped bark, and of scrambling feet, and finally two objects swung hand over hand like monkeys, down to the lowest branches, and from these dropped to the ground below, where they lay at full length for two whole minutes, munching green apples, and solemnly surveying each other.

"Something must be done," cried Billie, heroically, waving the core of his tenth.

"That's what they said," answered the Lamb, calmly, "and neither one will do what the other one wants her to."

Silence again, broken but once by Billie's low sorrowful murmur.

"Ten dollars left. Bread and berries. Berries and bread."

Suddenly a light broke over Dora's face. She threw her last apple frantically at an inoffensive robin, and proceeded to do her favorite Feejee dance. Billie watched her impassively until she was through. He was used to Dora's little ways of expressing sudden emotion. At last she stopped, and beckoned Billie to come closer.

"*Have you got two cents?*" she whispered, mysteriously.

"Nary a red cent," Billie answered, calmly.

"Borrow it then," ordered the Lamb in the same tone. "Borrow it of Mr. Keith. I've got a plan."

"Fire ahead. I'm listening," he said, and there under the apple-trees was unfolded the plot that was to bring about a revolution within the peaceful walls of the Nest. By sundown the whole plan was fully hatched, the two cents borrowed under a solemn vow of secrecy from Mr. Keith, and then the two conspirators went to supper with light hearts and faces serene.

CHAPTER IX

Billie Manages Things

"HAS any one seen the wee ones?" called Marjorie, from the kitchen, as the two passed the side window, and Dora paused in dismay. It was hours since she and Billie had seen the Owl and the Lion start cross lots riverward.

"Don't tell her," whispered Billie, warningly. "'Cause she'll worry. Let me tell her." He leaned his elbows on the window-sill, and pressed his face close against the mosquito netting so that he could see Marjorie.

"I am not sure," he said, with gentle solemnity, "and you're not to get excited or have a pow-wow over them, Muggins, but I'm afraid they're gollopped by polliwogs."

The carving knife fell to the floor, and Marjorie dashed to the door.

"Billie, did you let them go to the river?" she cried. "Avis, look out for the kettle. I'm going"——

But all at once she stopped short. Coming up the path from the barn were the two truants neither crestfallen or repentant, not a bit, but

smiling and triumphant; in fact, there was quite a dash of condescension in Winnie's manner as she nodded airily to the Lord and Lady of the Palace, and the Lion began at once:

"You don't know what we found down"—but the Owl's hand quenched all further information, and the two went on.

"There's something up," said Dora, decidedly, after she had returned Billie's earnest stare for a minute. "They've got a secret."

"So've we," whispered Billie, with a chuckle. "Come on. Let them have their little mouse-in-the-hole secrets. Think of what we know."

There were two rival factions at the table that night. On one side sat the Owl and the Lion, jubilant and crowing, and on the other Billie and the Lamb serenely superior to childish fancies and such small matters, but at last the Owl's attention was diverted.

"Blackberries again?" she said, critically, "and where's the butter?"

"We have none, dear," Marjorie said, gently. "You must do the best you can without. Billie, please pass the bread."

"We've had berries and bread for breakfast and supper every day this week," and the Owl's voice was one of injured plaintiveness as she refused the proffered bread.

Marjorie looked sad, and a trifle grieved. Avis was silent and proud. Billie looked from one to the other, and seeing no relief from either he took matters into his own hands as the silence was growing oppressive.

"Good for you, Winnie," he said, cheerily. "I've felt the same myself, only I'm more bashful than you, you know. Let's have a feast to-night."

"There isn't a thing to eat there, Billie," remarked Avis, severely, and Marjorie tried to give him a look of warning as he made a raid on the pantry, but his lordship never heeded them. There was a moment of suspense, and then he reappeared with Mrs. Rogers' cook-book in his hand.

"Now, then, good people," he began, perching himself on the back of his chair, and opening the cook-book. "We will begin this banquet with—ha—let me see—with bride's cake and chicken salad. 'Four pounds of sifted flour, four pounds of butter,' you hear that Winnie, *four* pounds in one lone cake, 'beaten to a cream, two pounds powdered sugar, two dozen eggs, flavor to taste.' Muggins, kindly pass Winnie the bride's cake."

Winnie was by far too delighted with the new 'make believe' to refuse the bread a second time, so the bride's cake was passed around the table, and sampled with enthusiasm. Next came the salad, and while Billie gravely read a detailed de-

scription of it's contents, the blackberries were eaten in respectful silence.

"We will now try croquettes," he said, "cocoanut croquettes, ladies, served with whipped cream. Dora, get the bread and milk bowls."

The feast was a glorious success. When it came to lady fingers and jellied quail, which Billie insisted upon classing together, because he said they would look so nice side by side, Avis cut slices of bread into fancy shapes, and more berries followed as quail.

"It does seem real," Dora said, daintily carving a berry in two. "When you hear all about what it is made of, and you are eating something anyway, why all you have to do is shut your eyes, and listen and make believe. Billie, you're a darling."

"Yes, while I've been feasting you, you've been eating my berries," exclaimed Billie, pointing tragically to his empty plate.

"If I hadn't taken them I wouldn't have had any jellied quail," answered the Lamb, demurely, "and I didn't want to disappoint you by not having any quail, you know."

"Well, I think that's the miserliest piece of gormandizing I ever heard of," began the hungry hero, but Marjorie laughed as she brought back the dish refilled from the pantry.

"We have plenty of berries," she said, setting it down before him.

"Yes, plenty of *berries*, but where's the chicken salad and deviled tongue and soft shell crabs and jellied quail that you folks had," he demanded, scornfully; "Dora, go and sit up there on the wood box, and read the cook-book to me. Read about pickles and puddings."

It was a splendid scheme they all agreed, and every meal afterward they took turns sitting on the wood box and reading the bill of fare while the rest made believe.

The days went by with leaden feet to Billie and the Lamb. Instead of roaming after the beetles and butterflies, they walked hopefully back and forth from the Nest to East Elmore post office every day for a letter, a letter from far-off Boston in old New England, from Aunt Bethiah Newell. It had been an easy matter to carry out the plot. Billie had smuggled paper and pencil to the barn, and up in the secret chamber of the Palace they wrote the fateful missive to Miss Newell. It was a queer mixture of both the Lamb's and Billie's ideas, and when it was done, Billie said if anything would fetch the old girl, he guessed that would. It read:

"MY DEAR AUNT BETHIAH:

"I thought I would write a letter to let you know that we are all alive, and hope you are the same. Muggins did not want to write to you because you treated mamma so

badly. There are six of us, and I am Billie, the boy. Reggie, is a boy, too, but he is only a little one. We live at a funny little place that we call the Nest. It belongs to Muggins, but nothing grows on the land around here except berries, and apples and eggs, and Muggins has only ten dollars left. Dora was playing circus, and tried to ride a colt, and sprained her ankle, and it cost quite a little to pay the doctor; but she is all right now, and sends her love, and wants to know what you look like, please. I wish you would please think out a way to help us. The girls don't know that I'm writing to you, except Dora. Avis is awfully afraid that Muggins will write to you because she thinks that you and Uncle Harvey ought not to keep all the money. She loved mamma ever so much, and she looks just like her, and she is smarter than any of us, and Muggins says she is a genius, because she writes stories; but she is awfully proud, and she doesn't like you. Muggins doesn't bother her head about things like that. She just likes us children. She is kind of pretty, too. Please address your letter to,

“Your affectionate nephew,

“WILLIAM RANDALL,

“East Elmore, Ill.”

When ten days had passed by and no letter arrived, the hopes of the two conspirators fell to zero and Marjorie wondered whatever could be the matter with Billie the bold, and his faithful comrade.

Then came a great day, for at last when Billie asked at the narrow glazed window for letters, one was handed out, a thick registered letter directed to Mr. William Randall, and the postmark was Boston. Not a word did either speak, but with one accord they started on a run down the main

street and never stopped until they were safe in the woods, the other side of the ravine.

"Now then," said Billie, holding up the envelope to the light, and shutting one eye to scrutinize it at a speculative distance. "I wonder if the old girl's done the proper thing."

"Oh, open it, you duffer, and find out," cried Dora, impatiently, her brown eyes fairly dancing with excitement as she watched Billie's deliberate method of opening a letter with scorn. When he drew out the enclosure, a couple of bills fell over his lap.

"Two twenties," commented Billie. "Humph, good for a starter, anyway. Here goes for the letter," and he proceeded to read it aloud.

"MY DEAR NEPHEW WILLIAM:

"Your letter received. I was very much pleased to learn of your existence, as I have never been quite sure how many of you there were, and I knew nothing of your whereabouts. Believe me, I shall take a deep interest in your welfare hereafter, and enclose a trifle which I trust may assist you in your present financial embarrassment. Now, Billie, I wish you at once to acquaint your sisters with the fact of our correspondence. I presume that 'Muggins' is sister Helen's eldest child, Marjorie, and she, of course, has charge of the others. As for Avis, I trust to see her, and all the rest of you before many days are passed, and then we will see if the hard feelings cannot be banished. Let me know if you are in urgent need of any more money.

"With love to all six, I am, "Your loving aunt,

"BETHIAH NEWELL."

"Hurrah! Hip, hip, hip, Hurrah!" shouted Billie, turning handsprings as fast as he could make himself go. "Isn't she an old darling, though? 'Enclose a trifle.' Well, all I got to say is that I hope she'll keep right on trifling. 'Financial embarrassment!' There's a neat high-toned way of putting it. Avis will like that. And won't her royal highness and Muggins put on airs when the old girl from Boston town comes west? Oh, we'll,

'Ride a cock horse,
From Banbury Cross,
To see a fine lady get on a white horse,
Rings on her fingers,
And bells on her toes,
She shall have music wherever she goes.'

"Rah! Rah! Rah! Dora," he cried, in a perfect ecstasy of exultation. "The old girl's a brick!"

"Let's trot on," he said, after somersaults became fatiguing, and they had re-read the letter, and spread out the two bills to look at them again.

"Not home?" Dora exclaimed, her eyes opening wide in surprise, at the mere suggestion of such a course. She had the money safely clutched in her hand now.

Billie knit his lordly brow. Just because she had been the one to think up the plan was really no reason why she should take the lead in order-

ing their goings in and their comings out from this time forth and forevermore, he mentally decided. It was time he asserted his ancient authority.

"Yes, ma'am, right straight home," he said, firmly. "Where else would we go, I should like to ask you?"

"Oh, Billie, I'm ashamed of you. You never look ahead for fun, not one bit," and the Lamb's voice was full of disdainful rebuke. "Go home, indeed. We'll march back to town, and spend heaps."

"What for?"

"Oh, butter for supper, and a few other little things," returned Dora, loftily. Then the light of knowledge broke in on the mind of William, and all feelings of irritated pride vanished before his old admiration for his comrade. It would be fine to go home and show up the letter and the money; but what was such a meagre triumph compared to going home in royal pomp and glory, with a wagon load of outward and visible signs of their wealth to dazzle the Nest dwellers, and spring a whole surprise party on them?

So back to town they went with the precious letter and one bill in Billie's pocket, and the other one tied up in Dora's handkerchief, and clasped tightly in her brown hand. In this manner

was the responsibility divided, and each felt an equal amount of importance as they wended their way to the largest store in East Elmore.

Mr. Hartwell, the grocer, smiled when the two dusty, red-cheeked children came into his store, and climbing up on stools, leaned their elbows on the counter with their chins on their palms, and regarded him confidentially.

"We want to order a whole lot of things, and we want to borrow one of your wagons, Mr. Hartwell, and will you let Fred take the things out home at once, please?"

Mr. Hartwell's smile faded to a puzzled look of inquiry. Nearly every one in East Elmore knew of the Nest and its inmates, and there was a general impression that the coffers of the Princess's treasury were not full to overflowing, but rather the contrary.

"Oh, it's all right," said Dora, reading his doubts in an instant, and after some tugging and untying she produced her bill, and smoothed it out on the counter with loving fingers. "There's one, and we've got another one just it's twin, and we've got a letter from our rich aunt in Boston, and if you don't believe it, you can see the letter."

"What's your order, Billie?" asked Mr. Hartwell, his smile returning instantly, "and I'm mighty glad for you, too."

Dora started the list with a barrel of flour, and a full line of staple articles with housewifely dignity, and then Billie put in his items.

"A lot of pickles, sweet, sour and mixed, and some cocoanut, and all the things you put in a plum pudding, and some deviled tongue, and soft shell crabs, and "——

"No crabs, Billie."

"What have you got then, that comes nearest to them?" asked William, anxiously.

"Shrimps, lobster, salmon, sardines "——

"Put in some of the whole lot," ordered the lord of the Palace, and the twenty dollar bill seemed to swell beyond the bounds of even the Wolligog, and its glorious possibilities were without limit in his eyes. "That's all, I think," he added, after a minute more, and the bill was paid in full.

"We'll be back in a few minutes, to ride home on the wagon with Fred," called Dora, as they were leaving. Then a fresh idea popped into her head, and she ran back.

"Oh, and say, Mr. Hartwell, please slip in a stick of candy for the Lion."

"Make it six," commanded Billie, grandly over her shoulder, and they went out for a stroll until all should be ready for the triumphal progress home.

It was about half past twelve. Marjorie had

called and called until she was breathless, but neither Billie nor Dora appeared; and when they failed to show up at dinner time, there was cause for alarm, for they never neglected that important function whatever happened.

At first Marjorie had not noticed their absence so much, for Mr. Keith had come in with a letter from Rob, and had read it aloud to her and Avis and the little ones. Avis had listened with an unwonted look of interest in her face, but Muggins could not keep from going to the door and shading her eyes for a glance down the road for the truants.

Winnie begged for the envelope to treasure, and she and the Lion sat down on the doorstep and looked at it hungrily. To Winnie the Red Rover was all that she had dreamed of now that he had really started off on his adventures, and some bright day he would come home with flaunting plumes and blare of trumpets, laurel-crowned and covered with glory, a prince indeed.

Rob wrote that he was homesick, but that so many new, strange things were happening around him that he had no time for worry or looking back. He felt as if he were a squirrel on a wheel in a cage. The wheel whirled, and he had to whirl, too, or get left. So he whirled. His studies were progressing finely and he thought it would

not be very long before he would be able to work in earnest. The letter was full of bright loving messages to the children, of merry comical adventures for Billie, and words of good cheer and hope for Marjorie. There was no message for Avis. When he had written it, he remembered her words, "Aren't you glad you're going?" and he thought that as yet he was not glad enough to answer her.

"I am so proud of Rob," Marjorie said, when Allyn had finished the letter, and she sighed softly, "I wish Billie could go away like that to some college or school and make something of himself."

Mr. Keith was silent, and she went out into the garden to take another look for the runaways.

"It would not do any good to send Billie away like that," Avis said. "He is not clever like Rob."

"I think that he is needed home here for a while," answered Allyn, thoughtfully, and then he turned suddenly and went out into the garden.

Marjorie was down at the gate, leaning over it as she looked along the road.

"I have been wondering," said Allyn, going directly to her, "whether Billie would not care to study with me this winter. That will be so much better than his going away from home yet awhile. What do you think, Marjorie?"

Marjorie's brown eyes were shining with unshed tears as she turned to him impulsively with outstretched hands.

"Think?" she repeated. "Why, I think that it will be splendid. It's just what I've been longing for all this time, to give him a fair chance so that in a year or so if anything should happen, he could enter college. It is so kind of you to offer, and if only Billie will do his part"——

A sound of rattling wheels made her pause, but this was immediately supplemented by a succession of thrilling cheers, war whoops, and plain every day yells.

"What on earth is that?" she began, her face paling as she looked beyond the gate, and then—Fred Hartwell drove up with Billie and Dora perched in state on top of a pile of sacks, barrels, bags, and boxes, keeping up the music. At sight of Muggins, Billie sprang down, and waved his cap at her joyously.

"Hello," he shouted. "Look at that load, will you," motioning proudly toward the wagon. "We did it ourselves, the whole thing, and I think it's the best surprise we ever made up. Fred, just dump everything down on the grass. We'll look out for them. Now, everybody walk into the sitting-room.."

Wondering with an odd, heavy ache in her

heart what new trouble the two well meaning comrades had brought her, Marjorie followed Mr. Keith into the sitting-room where the others had already assembled at the noise of the arrival.

"This," said Billie, opening the letter with a flourish, "this loving, and most welcome epistle is from our dearly beloved aunt, Miss Bethiah Newell, of Boston, Mass."

"Oh, Billie, Billie, what *have* you done!" cried Muggins, laying her face on Reggie's curls, as he stood beside her. Avis' face was white with pride and anger, fierce, loving pride for the fair, gentle mother's sake; but Billie ignored both unfavorable receptions, and proceeded to the reading of Aunt Bethiah's letter. There was a dead silence during the time. Dora's face was fairly shining with happiness, and she squeezed Muggins' hand reassuringly, but the squeeze failed to have the desired effect. When Billie had finished, he handed over the remaining bill with considerable ceremony, and Dora laid her change beside it in his hand.

"There is the 'trifle,'" he said, dropping the money in Muggins' lap. "Some of it we've spent, and if you two cooks do your part we wont need the cook-book to-morrow. That's all, only I'd like to say one thing. If her royal highness is going to get huffy over the best thing that ever

happened to us since we came, she ought to go and fall down the well and make a dinner of moss and polliwogs."

Marjorie looked at Avis. She stood at the west window, her back was turned, but there was rebellious pride in every outline of the tall graceful figure. Billie eyed her reflectively, and at last he said, gravely:

"You're a stiff-necked damsel, Avis."

"I'm not," said Avis, indignantly.

"Oh, yes, you are, too. 'Behold pride goeth before a fall, and confusion followeth upon a stiff-necked people.' You are a stiff-necked damsel, all right."

Avis checked the reply that arose to her lips, and started for the door.

"Won't you have some of the good things to eat?" called Dora; but there was no reply, and they let her go. Marjorie looked anxiously at Allyn, but he did not speak, and all at once the silence was broken by the Lamb, who gasped explosively, "Oh!"

"It's the two cents we didn't pay back," she replied in response to Marjorie's startled query. "We borrowed it to buy a postage stamp, and we've got to pay Mr. Keith right away."

The debt was paid in full in spite of Mr. Keith's urgent protests.

That night when the two girls were under the shadow of the four poster, Marjorie hoped that Avis would open her heart, and she was disappointed when the latter absolutely declined talking of the letter, the money, the coming of Miss Newell, or anything connected with her. So the first shadow came between them, for Marjorie could not but think she was in the wrong.

But in spite of Avis and her disapproval, the days that followed were glorious days, brimful of bustle and happiness. Blackberries were strictly forbidden fruit at the Nest banquets, and cook-books were rigidly debarred at meal time. Billie ate pickles until it seemed as if he would turn into one; and Marjorie even made cocoanut croquettes. Then there was the pudding, plum pudding, a beautiful marvel of toothsome dainties, a thing to yearn and hunger after greatly, Billie declared. It was made strictly according to the recipe he had read so often at the "make believe," feasts,—now a delicious reality. As for the Lion and the Owl, they wandered about in a state of unspeakable bliss, and Marjorie's old joyous laugh came back in the glad new time of plenty.

She had written to Boston, and received a long, loving letter from Aunt Bethiah telling, when she would arrive at East Elmore, and all was bustle and excitement at the Nest.

Avis absolutely refused to say anything regarding the expected guest, but the rest were all glad she was coming, and Dora felt in duty bound to write a letter on her own account.

“DEAR AUNTIE:

“Your letter came to-day, and we think you are very kind. You see, we thought you were going to be an awfully mean old thing. Billie has been calling you the old girl, and I called you the dragoness, and now, we're so glad you're not a bit that way. Billie was going to write to-day, but he don't feel very well. George Washington flew into the Palace of a Thousand Delights and knocked the glass covers off the boxes, and ate all his bugs off the pins. Billie was hopping mad, but George Washington died when he tackled the butterflies, and we buried him this morning, wrapped up in a flag. Billie felt so bad that he made up some poetry for the shingle we had for a gravestone, and this is it:

“‘G. W. BANTAM.

“‘In Memoriam, September 1, 1900.

“‘Oh, passerby, come wipe your eye,

And drop a tear for George.

The beetles filled him,

The butterflies killed him

And Washington died of gorge.’

“Lovingly, your niece,

“DORA.”

CHAPTER X

The Lion's Cave

HOUSECLEANING at Rook's Nest began in earnest now, and such a scrubbing as it received from the schoolroom to the kitchen! Not a single corner was neglected and every one save Avis had a share in the joyous turmoil.

It certainly was very peculiar the way her royal highness was acting. Billie puzzled over it, and finally decided that she was "just plain cranky," an opinion in which Muggins privately concurred herself, for all the time that she scrubbed and dusted, and Billie took up carpets, and took down curtains in the fervor of his zeal, while the Owl and the Lion set their numerous possessions in order, and everybody fairly buzzed with anticipation,—all this time, Avis sat quietly at the little desk, writing, writing, day after day as though there were no such person in the world as Aunt Bethiah Newell. Not a word did she say to Marjorie though, not a word of complaint or anger at the new condition of things, only her lips were set in a firmer line than usual, and when her

eyes met Marjorie's there was a look in them that made the latter think twice before she returned to her labor of cleaning.

"I wonder," Muggins said one day, stopping her work on the step-ladder to look down on the chief adviser, as a sudden problem presented itself to her, "where we shall put her to sleep."

They were all at work in the ell room, and Billie gave the window he was washing a last rub before he said, cheerfully :

"I tell you. If the old girl won't mind being a bit cramped on the lounge, why, I'd just as soon sleep out in the barn as not. And I can tell her how to manage so that the broken spring won't curl around her spine, you know."

"Don't be funny, Billie," Marjorie said, severely. "We will have to put her in the four poster with Avis, and I will sleep on the lounge."

"And I?" inquired William, mildly. "Am I to be tied up with blue ribbons to the pump?"

Marjorie looked him over with an unconcealed anxiety in her eyes.

"Oh, no, no, Billie, not the pump," she said, comfortingly. "You might try the hammock."

"'Tis well. We will sleep in the hammock," commented his lordship. "Dora, you will have to rock me to sleep every night, hereafter."

Dora was busy polishing the marble-topped

table to the last degree of cleanliness, and treated his order with the silent disdain it deserved, when all at once a shadow fell across the floor as Mr. Keith's head appeared at the open window.

"Hello," cried Billie, "jump right in. Never mind the door."

But Allyn disregarded the good advice, as he nodded smilingly at the figure on the ladder, and held up a letter teasingly before the eyes of the menagerie.

"Me!" shouted Billie and Dora in one breath, as they scrambled up and made for the window in hot haste, and the Lion set up a rival roar for possession as he dashed ahead of the Owl. Even Marjorie held out her hand for it; but Allyn laughed at them all, and tossed the letter over in Avis' lap.

"For Avis?" queried Billie, in astonishment. "Well, I never," and there was a decided tone of grievance in his words as he looked at Avis. Her face had flushed warmly at sight of the business letter-head, and Marjorie saw from her perch on the ladder that her hands were trembling as she tore the envelope open, and drew out the letter. There was only a brief, terse, business-like line; but as she read, the words seemed to dance before her eyes, and something rise chokingly in her throat.

"Dear Madam:"— So the letter said. "We beg to inform you that your story, 'A Prince in Disguise,' is accepted, and will be published in our magazine shortly. Enclosed please find check for same."

Check for same! Avis let the paper fall from her hand, and looked at the narrow slip of paper that lay unheeded on the desk. Then the lump in her throat grew larger, and some big tears splashed down on her hands.

"What is it, dear?" asked Marjorie, who had climbed down, and come to her side. "Not bad news?" and she slipped her arms around her neck as she saw the tears.

Without a word, Avis handed the check to her and Marjorie read in amazement.

"Twenty-five dollars!"

"Go on," said Billie laconically, looking from one to the other.

"No, no, it's true," Marjorie returned, excitedly, as she flung her arms in good earnest about Avis. "I knew you were a genius, Avis, and I was always sure you would succeed some day, dear."

Avis' eyes were shining brightly as she received Mr. Keith's congratulations and saw the look of pride in Muggins' happy face. Twenty-five dollars was not so very much, but it meant so much to her, a hundred times its real value. It

meant that after all her "scribbling" had not been in vain; it meant proof to the others that she was of some use; and it meant, too, what she longed for more than anything else now, the beginning of independence; but still she did not speak.

"You have gained the first step," Allyn said, "be patient, and work hard, and it will be only a question of time before you will find yourself a winner."

"I wish," Avis began, and then paused.

"What, dear?" asked Marjorie.

"I wish that I were in a great city like Rob!" Avis concluded, slowly, her eyes looking out of the west window through which the sunset had just begun to throw rays of crimson. There was silence for a few moments and then Allyn said:

"Of course you would have a better chance then, that is, if you were a boy like Rob."

"I wish I were a boy," Avis said, half laughing, and half in earnest.

"If wishes were horses, beggars might ride," Billie said, gaily. "Guess her royal highness would drive a span."

Avis drew a quick sigh.

"Anyway," she said, and there was a new ring of confidence in her voice, "anyway, I have this, and it is a good start. I am not afraid now."

After that her royal highness soared above the

rest of the Nest dwellers. Day after day she sat at the little rosewood desk, writing, ever writing, but the time had passed when the children of her fancy made their debut in the quiet kitchen, before a select audience of critical but highly appreciative persons. Not a line of this new creation had been seen by even Marjorie, not a hint of its wonderful plot breathed to a soul. Day by day, the neat pile of paper on the desk shelf grew higher, each sheet clear and dainty, like everything Avis did; and day by day her hopes grew stronger, and visions of untold wealth danced like a new Arabian Night's dream through the author's head.

But while Avis mused, and Marjorie worked and sang, there was dire trouble between the two rival factions in the remainder of the family. Every day the Owl and the Lion deliberately waited for a chance to run away from the other two, and then suddenly disappeared off the face of the earth. Billie had tracked them as far as where the ravine ended at the water's edge, but there had lost the trail. Dora had sat in the barn window and tried to trace their course from that eyrie, but in vain.

"They take the boat, that's sure," Dora said, emphatically, when the two had followed the run-aways all the morning, "and if Muggins knew that, she'd have seventeen fits."

"Well, I don't care," retorted Billie, with ruffled dignity. "It isn't fair to us. They're children, and can't be trusted to have secrets. Maybe they go down and play tag with the muskrats."

"No, sir-ree, it's something great, I know it is," the Lamb's tone fell to a mysterious pitch. "Something they're afraid we'll know, something perfectly lovely. I saw them carrying boxes down this way, and Reggie's dolls and lots of things. Now, where do they put them!"

Billie frowned and chewed some hay for consolation. The two lay on huge piles of fragrant hay up in the barn loft. The wide window was open, and the fall air heavy and still. A storm was coming up. Over in the northwest the great clouds rolled upward, dark beneath, grey white above, and there was a rustle and shiver among the dry leaves on the maples and apple-trees. At the first flash and peal, the Lord and Lady hastily deserted their palace and rushed pell mell to the Nest for shelter.

"Put down the windows, Billie," called Marjorie, as the rain fell in great sheets, and the thunder seemed to roar and crack an arrow's flight from the little house. "Tell Reggie to keep away from the door."

Billie glanced about in dismay. He had forgotten all about the Lion and the Owl.

"Why—why—they aren't here," he exclaimed. "They must have gone to the barn, or to Mr. Rogers', or some place."

But Marjorie would not believe it. They were out in the storm, she knew, cuddled down under some bush or tree, half scared to death, and she was going out to find them.

"What nonsense, Muggins," called Avis' slow, soft voice from the desk corner. "Of course they're at the farm. Winnie would have seen the storm coming up. She isn't a baby."

Marjorie hesitated. She had caught an old shawl from the nail in the entry, all ready to dash out in search of her treasures, but somehow Avis' words, as usual, had cooled her excitement. She stood by the kitchen window, her face pressed against the pane, all beaded with shining rain-drops, and waited, half expecting every minute to see two, drenched, forlorn little figures come stealing through the rain mist. But none came.

Avis kept on writing tranquilly, and Billie had tumbled into the deep Sleepy Hollow chair, his head on the seat cushions, his feet hanging over the top, reading the terrific adventures of "Commodore Tom, or the King of Coral Island." The Lamb alone shared Marjorie's anxiety. Side by side the two stood, with arms around each other, and Dora was thinking of the "Black Pirate,"

wondering if it had gone on a wild cruise down the river, but she did not tell Marjorie.

"I am going over to the farm," the latter announced, firmly, at the first sign of breaking clouds. "Won't you come, Avis?"

"No, dear, I'm too busy."

Marjorie's lips tightened, and with only the Lamb for company she started down the road leading to the farm.

"It isn't that I'm afraid," she said. "Only I want to be sure."

Mrs. Rogers was mending at the side bay window, and nodded smilingly to them as they came up the path between the tall rows of hollyhocks and bouncing Betsies.

"Pretty bad storm, wasn't it?" she called. "See the big walnut where the lightning struck it? Father's gone to see after the cattle down by the river."

"Is Reggie here?" asked Marjorie, breathlessly. "He and the Owl haven't been home at all, Mrs. Rogers, and I'm so worried."

"Land, child, no, they ain't been here." Mrs. Rogers dropped her stocking ball to the floor, and rose anxiously. "Haven't been home! You don't say. Land!"

"They must be lost somewhere," and Marjorie's face grew earnest and determined as she pushed

the old red shawl back from her head, and started away. As she turned from the porch, she saw Mr. Rogers coming up from the meadow, his high topped boots wet from the tall soaked grass. He was holding something in his hand, a queer, shapeless, dripping something.

"Hello, Muggins!" he said, cheerily. "Tell Reggie I found one of his doll babies down by the river, and if he doesn't take better care of his family, they'll all have measles and croup and toothache."

There was no answering merriment from the girls. Marjorie caught the poor little rag doll in her arms, and her eyes filled with tears, though she tried to be brave and sensible.

"Reggie must have dropped it," she said. "He and Winnie are lost, Mr. Rogers. Where did you find it?"

"Right down by the ravine," replied Mr. Rogers, his face grave and troubled. "Lost? Those babies? Land o' Goshen, and in that storm, too. Come on, though, we'll find them. Mother, you'd better fix some hot ginger tea, and go over to the little house, and you two come with me."

It did seem so good to have some one to take the lead. Some one so kind and strong. Dora and Marjorie tramped obediently after Mr. Rogers ;

and, as they went by the Nest, Dora gave her favorite war-whoop, that was ever the summons signal for Deadshot Billie.

Billie heard it, and "Commodore Tom" was flung into a corner.

"Coming, Avis?" he asked, over his shoulder.

"No, I'm not," returned her royal highness. "You'll probably find them in the barn, and I'm not going to be bothered. I'm just at an interesting point."

"Oh, just write, 'And the villain still pursued her,' and come on," teased Billie. "Maybe you'll be sorry."

But Avis only shook her head, and he joined the rest of the search party, already far past the barn.

"They aren't in the Palace," Dora told him; then he saw the rag doll, and thought of the boat at once, and the two comrades were silent as they followed Mr. Rogers and Marjorie to the ravine.

A wet, autumn wind was blowing, a "talky one," Winnie used to call that kind, when she heard it whispering and calling around the trees. The bottom of the ravine was full of fallen leaves soaked through, and it was chill and desolate all around.

"There's the 'Black Pirate,'" cried Dora, hopefully, discovering the little boat under the willows

and reeds, "but I don't see any footprints. The rain must have washed them away."

"I found the doll right there by the wall," said Mr. Rogers, pointing to the old stone wall that divided the ravine from the pasture, and kept the cattle in their own territory.

Marjorie's face was pale under its coat of tan, and her voice unsteady, as she placed her hands to her lips, and called the runaways' names. But there was no response save for a cat-bird answering shrilly in the distance, and she stopped in despair.

Billie took her place, standing on the stone wall, and yelling like a Sioux on the warpath. The Lamb, however, was busy in another way. She had climbed into the boat, and was perched on the middle seat bailing out the water, when all at once she paused, and stared at something a few rods down the shore. There was a mound there, nearly hidden by the willows, a queer round mound that looked like an inverted chopping bowl. The grass grew thickly on its top, but directly in front, facing the water, a large lump of earth had become dislodged by the heavy rain, and crumbled away, exposing to view a semi-circle of stone or rock which looked very strange in such a place.

Moreover, a couple of birch saplings had fallen

before it, and what had attracted Dora's attention was the shaking of the under branches.

While Billie was yelling himself hoarse on the stone wall, the Lamb quietly made her way to the mound, for a closer view. Being a worthy follower of Billie the Bold, she was not one whit afraid, but dragged the branch aside, and lo! Something was moving out of the pile of fallen earth! Slowly and with great effort it came, and Dora grasped it firmly, and called to Marjorie. It was the end of the punting pole from the boat.

"They're at the other end," she exclaimed, excitedly. "Trying to dig out."

"Dig out of what?" asked Marjorie, in bewilderment, but Billie had discovered the stone curve at the top of the mound, and, seizing a flag stick, went to work digging, too, with the Lamb helping. Presently they had made a fair sized hole around the pole end, and Billie took a firm hold of the pole and pulled. There was a frantic jerk from the other end, and a faint, smothered yowl sounded, so dear to Marjorie, that she could have cried for joy. Billie begun digging at the top now, while the rest pulled the pole, and at last he gave a triumphant cry, and vanished through the aperture. A minute more, and there was a mighty lurch forward of earth, and the secret hiding place of the Owl and the Lion lay open to the

world, and the amazement of men. First, there was the half moon of stone like the entrance to a tunnel, so overgrown with weeds and tall grass that unless one were directly opposite it, it was completely hidden from sight. The top of it was only four feet from the ground, but there was quite two feet that one had to step down before one stood in the secret chamber.

As for this latter, Marjorie and Dora knelt down and stared into it in astonishment. It was a long, dim cave of stone and cement, about eight feet deep, and in the centre of it stood the two red-eyed, tearful, frightened runaways. There was a plentiful supply of earth sprinkled in their tousled hair. Winnie's dress was hopelessly torn, but not a cross word was said. Billie lifted the Lion and handed him out to Marjorie's eager arms, and the Owl followed. Not so Billie. He stood in the centre of the cave, arms akimbo, interested and admiring. It was a wonderful den. All of Reggie's dolls were ranged against the walls in stately array, and Winnie had smuggled some of her favorite story books down there. There was an old braided mat in one corner. Marjorie had hung it on the clothesline to dry once and it had fallen into the hands of the robbers. There were also some of Avis' discarded ribbons and bits of silk.



THE FRIGHTENED RUNAWAYS

"We like to dress up and make believe we're pirates—an'—an' fairies, an' gun-momes," explained Winnie, sobbingly.

"An' wobberth," put in Reggie, dolefully. "An' thee therpenth."

"An' it started to rain, so we just cuddled down to wait till it was over, an' I was telling a story, an' Reggie went to sleep. An' it rained, an' rained, an' rained, an' I went to sleep, too, an' that's all, till I woke up, an' heard Billie calling."

"Bet a cookie you'd hear that," chuckled Billie.

"Then we tried to get out, an' couldn't."

"And then?" asked Marjorie, lovingly.

"Then we just cried, and poked with the pole," concluded the Owl, with a sigh of relief.

"But what is it anyway?" asked Dora, jumping down into the cave where Mr. Rogers had already joined Billie.

"Well, it goes with the Randall farm, that's all I know," said Mr. Rogers, as he pounded on the cement wall and thumped on the ground. "Your uncle fixed it long ago for one of his crazy ideas, but I don't know what the idea was. He had workmen over from Elgin, and they were down quite a while. Seems as if he used to say he was going to lay water pipes from the river up to the house, and this must have been the starting place."

"Of course," exclaimed Billie. "The river

rises way over this when it's full. Gee wollikins! what if it had started to come in to-day."

"Billie, stop," commanded Marjorie, indignantly. "As if we hadn't had enough worry without making a little more. Everybody hustle and help get these two damp chickens home and to bed before they catch cold."

So Billie bore the Lion in his arms, and Mr. Rogers held Winnie, and the procession wended its way to the little house.

It was growing dark. Mrs. Rogers had brewed ginger tea, and was watching anxiously at the back door. When it grew too dark to see the paper plainly, Avis laid aside her pencil, and awakened from her day dreams to everyday life.

"Oh, haven't they come back yet," she exclaimed, when she entered the kitchen. Mrs. Rogers shook her head, and slipped her arm around the slim figure. She liked Avis, as she did the rest. That is, all save Marjorie, who held sway in her heart on a pedestal only a little way beneath Rob. When Billie would dilate confidentially on her royal highness's oddities, Mrs. Rogers would only laugh.

"Land, don't you know smart people can't be like everyday folks, Billie? They just can't. Look at Rob. He'd start out to plow, and by an' by father would see the oxen and the plow down

in a shady corner, and Rob would be off drawing pictures, or catching squirrels, maybe. Of course, it's harder on Muggins to have her so, but she'll come out all right, yet. She's only a half grown kitten, anyway. Let her write and study. It's seldom enough that kind come into the world, that's what I told father when he'd scold Rob."

Billie would listen very politely and respectfully, and say "Yes'm," and go away feeling the same resentment toward Avis he always did, and believing her to be as much of a crank as ever. But Avis always felt that she had a place in Mrs. Rogers' warm heart; and, while she never liked either Rob or his father, she could not help feeling grateful for the sympathy and love of the old lady, whom all save Winnie and the Lion blamed her at the little house.

To-night a quick pang of remorse swept over her, as she saw the figures coming through the purple shadows, and the burdens which two of them bore.

"Are they hurt?" she asked, meeting them half way. Before Marjorie could reply, Billie exclaimed in one of his impulsive, unfortunate bursts :

"No'm. Not quite dead yet, thank you. But if we hadn't gone after them, they'd have been buried alive in a hole in the ground for all your

royal Ink Blotness cared. Go on back to your old chapters. We can look out for them all right, without any of your help, thank you. Go concentrate your thoughts."

"Avis, don't mind what Billie says," called Marjorie, pleadingly, but Avis had stopped short in the path at the first word, and, turning, had walked back to the house, silent and hurt.

After the two runaways had been put to bed, and been "gingered," as Billie called it, Marjorie walked half way back to the farm with Mrs. Rogers, talking over the plans for the coming of Aunt Bethiah Newell. She had almost forgotten Avis, when suddenly, as she was passing the little garden on her way home, she saw a figure over beneath the lilac bushes.

"Avis, is that you?" she asked, hesitatingly. The moon had not yet risen and it was so dark she could hardly see at all.

Silence a moment, then a broken voice said in a low tone :

"Yes, but I want to be alone, please."

"Why, Avis Randall, you're crying!" cried Marjorie, hurrying through the dew wet grass and kneeling beside her. "You don't mind what Billie says, do you?"

"Yes, I do," replied Avis, between her sobs. "I try and try so hard to work and make some-

thing of myself so you will all have plenty, and you are all against me, and laugh at me, and think I'm always wrong. I wish"——

"What?" Marjorie's arms were clasped around her. "Don't wish any crazy things. Maybe there's a fairy godmother around who'll give it to you. And you know how we all love you."

But Avis did not reply, and after a while, when her nose and eyes were not quite so red, they went into the house.

And Billie, shrewdly guessing many things, hunted up some new apples, and some ancient molassess candy, and offered them up as a peace sacrifice, but her royal highness's wrath remained unappeased and she sought the shelter of the four poster, and buried her sorrows in Pillowdom, leaving Muggins to puzzle alone over this new, unruly imp of discord which had appeared in the merry little home circle.

CHAPTER XI

All Hallows' Eve

"WELL, there's one thing, anyhow," Dora said, one day in the barn sometime after Avis' receipt of the check, when she and Billie were holding a secret session to discuss the subject. "It doesn't make her one bit nicer. She goes off more than ever since she got that letter, pokes off all by her lonesomes, and scribbles, and scribbles, and scratches away at old stories all the time. And she's getting wrinkles, too."

"Go on," said Billie, in mild suspicion. "That's a big one."

"No, sir-ree, it is not," protested the Lamb, earnestly, shaking her head solemnly over the evils which had come to pass. "She's got two little puckery ones over her nose where she scowls so much, and she sets her teeth hard, and doesn't always hear you when you speak to her, and she won't eat much, or talk much, or anything."

"Geewollikins," gasped Billie, his eyes wide with apprehension. "What will Muggins do if she does something crazy."

Dora sighed heavily, and gave Darling's neck a meditative poke with her finger as she sat on the edge of the manger.

"No," she said at last, "I don't believe she'd do anything really crazy. I think's it's all on account of Aunt Bethiah."

"Think she won't receive our fairy godmother with open arms?" asked Billie, chewing a straw, anxiously.

"No, I don't," returned the Lamb, emphatically. "I think something queer is going to happen."

If she had said it in an ordinary tone of voice, Billie would not have minded; but she spoke slowly, and "solemncholy," as the Lion would have said. The sunset glow had faded from the shadowy barn, making it dim and spooky, so Billie the Bold looked over his shoulder and felt the shivers descending on him, and deeming discretion the better part of valor, he acted accordingly.

"Where are you going?" called the Lamb after his swiftly retreating figure.

"Supper," returned the Lord of the Palace, cheerfully, thereby concealing his moral weakness by a growing physical one, and, with a sigh, Dora slipped down from her perch on the manger, and followed him.

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown," was said long, long ago, and certainly the crown of the

sovereign of the kingdom of Rattletibang pressed heavier ever day. Someway the home life was not nearly so happy as it had been before Aunt Bethiah had begun sending frequent and generous donations toward its support. Of a sudden, Marjorie found her position in the household changed from that of the little mother who was alternately adored and defied in spasmodic fluctuations of sentiment, to that of a superior being of great importance, a being to be revered and respected as the possessor of much filthy lucre, and therefore benefactress in general to a humble following of dependents. When the Lion cuddled up in her arms for his good-night kiss, he would nestle a little closer nowadays as he whispered what he wanted Santa Claus to bring him for Christmas, and Winnie developed a sudden mania for washing dishes, her special abhorrence before. "'Cause it makes Muggins' hands red, and Aunt Bethiah won't like that;" so she told Dora, privately.

Billie and the Lamb were not a bit meek and lowly in their manner of doing reparation for past wrongs. Just a shade more respectful, that was all; but somehow, while she laughed, it hurt Marjorie a little when Billie suggested gravely that she lengthen her dresses like Avis wore hers, and keep her hands clean, and try to wad her curls up in a tight little "pug," like Mrs. Rogers did.

"But why must I, Billie?" she asked, wistfully, standing in the doorway with the broom in one hand and the dustpan in the other. "Won't I do like this?"

"Nope. You've got to act grown-up and dignified before the old girl," was her big brother's answer. "Dora says you're most eighteen now. Anyway, Mr. Keith says you're a regular kid."

"William Randall, did he say that?" and Muggins flushed as she caught Billie by his shoulders, and squared him around to face her. "Honest and true?"

"Honest," protested Billie, calmly. "He said you acted ever so much younger than you really were."

"Oh, that's different," said Marjorie, with a sigh of relief, but all the same Billie's words sank deeply into her heart, and bred new thoughts there. She could not exactly define the feeling, but she realized that something had come between Avis and herself, something that swept aside the old sweet sympathy and frank confidence. Avis held herself aloof from the little family chats and confidences now, and, at night, beneath the shadow of the four poster, she kept her own counsels, and never talked of her ambitions or air castles any more.

"She's a genius all right," Billie remarked,

sagely, after a special exhibition of Avis' queer-ness. "Geniuses are always half cracked, don't you know they are, Muggins?"

Marjorie shook her head wearily. She sat at the kitchen table, her chin resting on her hands. It was the last day that they would have by themselves; for, although Aunt Bethiah had postponed her visit for some weeks she was to arrive on the morrow, and it had been an eventful day in the history of the Randalls.

There was much rivalry among the Rattleibangers as to which one should bear the honor of meeting and welcoming the coming guest. Billie had long since announced his irrevocable decision of being the first to hug the "old girl," and as for the others, and their plans, why, they could fight it out amongst themselves. William washed his hands of the whole affair.

Marjorie was worried. She wanted to go herself, but when it came to taking the menagerie along, too, she did not know exactly how to arrange it.

"What time does the train come," asked Dora, finally.

"About half-past seven at night, auntie wrote," Marjorie said.

"Well, then," cried the Lamb, joyously, "what's the matter with the whole circus going?"

Don't you see, Aunt Bethiah will see us all at once, then, and get over the shock quicker than if we came like prize story instalments, one or two chapters at a time. Let's all go."

So it was settled that they were all to walk down to the depot, the following evening, and meet the guest of honor with all ceremony. The Nest was as spick and span as five pair of hands could make it. Even the Lion had done his share. Winifred and he had gone to the woods and brought home brightly colored leaves, wonderful affairs in red and gold, and deepest russets, and the little home was profusely decorated with these. Although she was very tired now that everything was done, Marjorie felt a thrill of satisfaction and contentment as she took a final look around the rooms, and gave a last touch here and there.

It was All Hallows' Eve, and Mrs. Rogers had invited all the children over to the farm to spend the evening and have a royal good time in the old fashioned way, and all were ready except Avis. The menagerie and Billie were in the kitchen, and his lordship was descanting upon the superior merits of pop-corn and apples.

"'Cause why?" Marjorie heard him explain. "'Cause apples fill you up before you get all the taste you want, but pop-corn"—his voice rose higher and became most emphatic, "pop-corn

beats anything, 'cause you can eat and eat, and then start in all over again, and eat some more. The Lamb and I bet five cookies that we can eat more pop-corn to-night than you and the Lion, Winnie."

Marjorie did not wait to hear more, as it was getting late, and they had promised to be at the farm in time for supper, so she went to the school-room to hurry up Avis. The door was ajar, and a thin path of lamp light glanced through the dim, shadowy sitting-room. Marjorie pushed the door open, her face bright and happy. Over at the desk sat her royal highness. Her back was toward the door, but Marjorie saw that she was writing, and as she thought of the little ones waiting for their good time, she could not help feeling a little hurt and bothered.

"Are you ready, Avis?" she asked, a trifle crossly for her.

Avis raised her head at the sound of her voice, and her own was low and a little unsteady as she answered, shortly :

"I am not going with you to-night."

"Not going!" echoed Marjorie, in surprise, going quickly to the desk, where she could look down into Avis' telltale eyes, and read her reason there. "Why not?"

"I want to write," Avis replied, not meeting her

gaze. Then Marjorie saw that her face was white, and that she had been crying, and in a moment all her vexation had vanished, and she was herself, tender and solicitous.

"Oh, let the old writing go for to-night, dear," she said, impulsively, clasping her arms around the slender bowed form at the desk. "Come and have one out and out good time with us. It will do you so much good. I know it will, and you look so worn out and tired. Come on."

Avis shook her head, and tried to draw away from the close embrace, but her sister went on:

"Why, you meant to go, too. You're all dressed and ready."

She flushed guiltily.

"No, no, I didn't," she said, hesitatingly. "Do go and leave me, I want to write to-night. Never mind me, Muggins."

"But the children?"

"Oh, they won't miss me," and she laughed, an odd little mirthless laugh that bothered Marjorie. "As long as you are with them they will not mind me."

"Oh, don't," pleaded Marjorie, anxiously. "We want you so much, and it's our last night alone, you know."

But Avis' head was bent over the desk, and she was silent. Grieved and wondering, Marjorie

turned reluctantly away, but she had hardly reached the door, before Avis was beside her, her arms thrown closely about her, and her face pressed down on her shoulder.

"Don't go away from me like that, Muggins," she whispered. "And don't be angry with me. I—I can't go."

Marjorie only smoothed the soft fair hair, as tenderly as if it had been Winnie, and petted and comforted her royal highness in a way that she had not done since they had come to the Nest.

As if it mattered after all, she said, lovingly. It was a nice kind of person who wanted other people to be happy their way. If she wanted to stay home and write, then all right. Angry? Not a bit. As if she could be angry when she was straining every nerve to be famous and finish that long story that was to set the world afire and make the name of Randall one of highest honor.

"Are you girls ever coming, or have you gone to bed?" called Billie from the kitchen, and Marjorie gave her royal highness a last kiss as she started to obey the call.

"I hate to leave you here all alone," she said, wistfully, hoping even now that she might relent and come, but in vain. Avis had braced up, as Billie said, all at once, and hastened her departure. Still, Marjorie had a queer feeling that there

was something wrong as they left the little house, and Avis stood in the doorway, watching them all the way down the road, for with the trees stripped of their foliage there was a clear view almost as far as the Rogers farm.

But the menagerie was wonderfully impatient, and fairly bubbled over with excitement as they danced on ahead like goblins in the uncertain light, and there was no time for Marjorie to linger. If she had gone back then and there, and stayed, it would have changed many things, and saved many a heartache. How was she to know, though, that when they were out of sight, the lone figure in the doorway sank down in the entry all crushed and desolate, her head on her arms, crying as Avis rarely cried. How was she to know that afterward the same lone figure had stolen back to the schoolroom, and sought the "mother's corner," to try and gain some of the old strength and resolution from its influence. As it happened, she knew nothing at all about it, and when Billie mildly inquired if her royal highness had another crank, she did not refute the statement.

All during the long evening at the farm while the children ate apples and popped milk-pans full of corn, Marjorie could not banish the vague feeling that something was wrong; and, in the midst of the laughter and merriment, her thoughts re-

curred constantly to Avis, and her sudden show of affection. On the whole, she was glad when the evening was over, and after Mrs. Rogers had spread her good-night kisses impartially around, the sleepy little band started homeward along the moonlit road.

"You won't need a lantern, will you, childies?" she called as they left the garden, and Billie laughed, and shouted back that they were not afraid of spooks or spookesses, either.

There was a creepy wind abroad, a real, thoroughbred autumn wind that came in quick gusts and swirls, with a shrill, sharp whistling through the dry branches and loose leaves. Then the ground was hard and bare, and there was frost, and the very moonlight looked chilly and unfriendly, as they huddled together like a flock of sheep and hurried on toward the little house.

The Lion was the only one who caused delay. He fairly bulged with apples tucked in every conceivable place about him, one might almost say inside and out; but at all events, Billie and the Lamb each had hold of his hands, and thereby hastened his movements so forcibly that every now and then there would be a dull thud on the ground, and the Lion would let out a sleepy wail for his lost treasures, which had to be recovered before any further progress was possible.

"I wonder if her royal highness of the Imperial Ink Blot has been scribbling all this time, or if the gobble-uns have got her," Billie grumbled, as he dropped his chin deeper down into the depths of his coat collar. "Bet a cookie she's let the kitchen fire go out."

They had rounded a slight curve in the road, and now the Nest could be seen among the stripped lilac bushes.

"There isn't any light burning," Marjorie said, as she peered eagerly through the gloom. "Guess she's in bed. She looked so tired." Here she stopped, and then quickened her step almost to a run, pausing only to say to Billie over her shoulder: "If it is out, don't scold or tease, Billie, please."

Billie nodded good-humoredly, and they all started on a trot up the garden path. The house was dark and dreary and the wind whistled in every crack and crevice, and rattled every loose board and shingle, but there was a cheery glow from the kitchen where the warm red firelight danced a jolly witch jig with its shadows, and Marjorie whispered to them to walk on tip-toe, and go right to bed, so as not to awaken Avis.

So it happened that it was not until after the little ones were all undressed and tucked in bed, the doors fastened, and the fire attended to for the

night, that at last the little mother took a lamp and started for the realm of the four poster. Not more than two minutes later an apparition appeared to Billie in the sitting-room, Marjorie with her face blanched white with dread, and her brown eyes wide and scared.

"Billie, Billie," she said, in a queer, broken voice. "Are you awake?"

"Sure," Billie returned, sitting up on his lounge bed, tousle haired and round eyed. "What's up? Spooks?"

"S-sh!" Marjorie whispered, warningly, "don't let the children hear you." She glanced over her shoulder out into the hall, and then came over to the side of the lounge.

"Avis has gone," she said, simply.

So slight and small she looked in the semi-darkness, with her hands clasped closely across her breast, and her head bowed a trifle forward that Billie was more frightened by her appearance than by her words. Never before had he seen Muggins, bright, happy, ever hopeful, Muggins, so crushed and helpless, so different from her strong, resolute self, and he swallowed back a lump in his throat as he asked, stupidly:

"Gone where?"

"Chicago!" answered Marjorie, and from her tone, it might as well have been Kamchatka.

"She left this pinned to my pillow. Oh, Billie, Billie, boy, what shall I do?"

Her voice broke, and she knelt beside him, her hands pressed over her face as she sobbed unrestrainedly.

"Don't, don't do that, Muggins," he faltered, one hand clutching the slip of paper she had given him, and the other patting the shoulder nearest to him in a bewildered effort to impart sympathy. "May—maybe it's only a joke, one of her funny ways, you know. Maybe she's gone out for a walk, Muggins."

But Marjorie did not respond, and he remembered the letter she had given him. The tall, old-fashioned lamp with its plump, rosy-tinted globe, and flower-twined stem, stood on the center-table, and he lit it, and read the message which her royal highness had left for them. It was a sad little note, now brave and confident in tone, as it foretold her great success, then again, pitiful and forlorn as it begged them not to think her a deserter, that it was the only thing she could do to add her mite to the commonwealth, and as long as Aunt Bethiah Newell was coming, she could go away with a free heart, knowing that they would all be cared for.

They must not try to find her, or think that she was going out into the world to be unhappy or

poor. She had divided the story money, and Muggins' share was in the little blue Chinese sugar bowl in the pantry. With all that she herself had left, she could manage very well until she got work on one of the newspapers or magazines or something. When she had made her fortune, she would come back to the Nest, and they would all be happy with their very own money, and then, perhaps, they would not think her a useless, dreamy castle builder.

Billie sat up on the lounge, his knees drawn up tentwise beneath the quilts, and his eyes staring at the letter until the voice of Marjorie recalled him.

"Why don't you say something to help me, Billie," she asked, without raising her head. "I don't believe that you realize what it all means. *She's gone, gone away*, and it's so cold and lonesome outside, and maybe she had to walk through the ravine, and she's always afraid down there at night. Oh, what can we do?"

If Avis had appeared then and there, there would have been a strong inclination on the part of Billie to fire pillows at her. As it was, he scowled, pursed up his lips, winked hard for reasons best known to himself, and tried not to look down at the little figure in white kneeling beside him.

"We can't do a thing, Muggins," he said, finally.

"She was tired of us, and of the little house and everything. She said it was all slow and commonplace, and—and I suppose she'll be happier off there in the city. Don't you worry a bit, dear, or try to chase her up. Just let her alone, and let her flap her wings all she wants to, and if she's a bird, why, she'll fly, and if she's only a chicken, then she'll come back home to roost."

There was no reply, but he could hear Marjorie's low sobbing, and it frightened him. Even when their mother had died, Marjorie had not cried or given way like this, but had been quiet and pale and still.

"You had better go to bed, Muggins," he urged, leaning over to hug her, but she shook her head with a quick gesture of dissent.

"No, no, I can't go back there without her, Billie," she said. "I can't sleep now, don't you understand?"

"Humph," murmured Billie, reflectively, thinking how queer girls were anyway. Of course Avis had gone away, and it was too bad, and of course he felt sorry, too; but he didn't see why they should lose all their sleep just because Avis had cut up one of her crowning didoes.

Marjorie sat up, and pushed back her chair. Her face was white and wet with tears, and her eyes shone brightly in the semi-darkness, as they

watched the glimpse of moonlit road barely visible from the window. The minutes passed slowly. Billie winked hard to try to keep awake for her sake; but after some hard, ineffectual nips at his arms, his head drooped, he forgot to pinch, and Marjorie kept her vigil alone.

She left the couch, and knelt by the window after extinguishing the light. The wind was blowing in fitful gusts, and every snapping twig made her heart beat faster, and kept her senses keenly alert. But the hours stole on and on; Billie slumbered soundly, and the only wakeful heart in the kingdom of Rattletibang was that of the forlorn princess, watching and waiting, and hoping against hope, for the return of the runaway.

CHAPTER XII

Avis Tries Her Wings

AND Avis?

When the 8:45 train for Chicago sped away into the night from the little station at East Elmore, it bore a girl in grey, with set, firm lips, and clear tearless eyes, who never once looked out of the window to catch a last glimpse of her home; but instead, arranged her satchel and jacket, and settled herself comfortably for the long journey, as if leaving home to go out into the world alone were an every day occurrence.

Now that the decisive step was taken, and there was no turning back, there was little room in her heart for sadness, and none for regret. She was so full of hope, of confidence in herself. That one lone check had opened up the greatest possible vista of what the future was to bring her. If one small story could bring so much, what would happen when she consigned the precious manuscript of her first long story to the eager waiting hands of gracious publishers. No one knew how she had worked over this last effort. She did not even read it to Muggins or Billie. It was too

wonderful and sacred a thing to be lightly spoken of. It would be bound in green and gold, she decided, leaning her head back on the velvet cushioned seat, and watching the globes over the lamps in the car tremble with the motion of the train. Green and gold, that was the way the golden-haired princesses were always garbed, and was not this a royal offspring, the child of her fancy? And the leaves would be of that heavy, beautiful, cream tinted paper, like Muggins' copy of Longfellow on the centre-table at home. And there would be her name in gold letters across the cover, Avis Newell Randall, and how glad and proud she would be when she sent the first copy home with a generous share of the wealth it was sure to bring her.

And the dedication. She closed her eyes dreamily. Would it be to Muggins? Of course, to Muggins. Whom else? And here the globes gradually became a blurr of soft light, the tired eyelids drooped. The old gentleman across the aisle glanced up and saw the girl in grey smiling in her sleep, and wondered if she were so very happy, and he sighed as he turned over the page of his magazine.

Three hours was the scheduled time for the run between East Elmore and Chicago, but to-night the train was late, and it was nearly two o'clock

when Avis was awakened by the movement and rustle of the preparations for departure by her fellow travelers, and the baggage agent came through rattling his cluster of brass checks. No, she said, with sleepy dignity; she did not wish her trunk checked, and then she nearly laughed aloud as she remembered the little old-fashioned black trunk which she had brought away from home. Then she thought of the story Fred Hartwell would have to tell Billie, of how he had been asked to call at the Nest for the trunk and its owner, when he drove along, after delivering groceries in Batavia over the river.

She sat up, and looked out of the window. Nothing to be seen, but dark rows of houses, then tracks, with now and then the flash of a red or green signal light in the darkness, and then at last, came the long station with its bright, clear electric lights, and the journey was over.

Without doubt, if it had been Marjorie, she would have been frightened and bewildered at finding herself at two in the morning alone in Chicago, but Avis was different. City born and bred, with her heart full of independence and confidence, and with the munificent sum of ten dollars and twenty-five cents in her pocketbook, she felt that the whole city was hers, a kingdom awaiting its conqueror.

With this thought uppermost in her mind, she followed the crowd up the broad marble staircase, and entered the warm, cosy waiting-room. She had planned it all out way back in East Elmore, just how she would remain there until daylight, and then go into the restaurant on the opposite side of the stairs, and have coffee and rolls before she started out to explore her kingdom, and the program was carefully adhered to.

A few hours' more sleep with only the sing-song tones of the official who announced the departure of trains to break the silence, a few minutes for the ten cent breakfast, and she left the depot at 8:30.

When Rob had spread his wings for the flight from the home nest, the all important question had arisen of where he was to live, and many comical descriptions of boarding-houses and land-ladies had he written home, to all of which Avis had listened with the greatest interest, and now, in her pocketbook, was a precious slip of paper with a name and address on it.

"It is a fine place," Rob wrote. "I saw a splendid old lady with white hair, but she only took ladies to board, so I had to start off on a fresh hunt. Mr. Keith gave me the name of that place, so that I was awfully sorry to lose it."

Marjorie had been reading the letter aloud, and

at this point Avis had turned to Mr. Keith as he sat at the table looking over Billie's lessons, and had asked :

"Where is the place, and what is her name?"

"Madame Penionte," Allyn had replied, with a reminiscent smile. "She is a charming old lady with whom I boarded while in the city with my mother, and now"—he had hesitated, and a shadow of sadness had come in his grey eyes, as he bent lower over the books again, "now, mother has gone, and I have not seen Madame for many years. Things have changed, of course," and he had written out the address and handed it to her.

So it was here that her royal highness determined to go, and every policeman from the Northwestern depot to Dearborn Street was interrogated as to the location of Madame's dwelling place, until at last she found herself over another bridge, and leaving the smoky, crowded heart of the city behind. Straight ahead, the policeman at the bridge had said, and she went on feeling strong and capable of any achievement, observant of everything around her, and with no thought of the little Nest and its inmates, so very far away all that part of her life seemed even now.

It was near Huron Street that she found the place. A tall, brown stone four-story house, on Dearborn Avenue, slim and plain, one of many of

the same kind, only this one had square bay windows and a low French doorway without steps, opening directly on the street. As Avis raised her hand to press the electric bell, the heavy door of oak and plate glass swung suddenly open, and a young girl came out in a hurry singing to herself, and almost running into Avis.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, penitently, and stopped to look at the stranger, her hands in the pockets of her short tan-colored jacket, her brown eyes full of interest. It was the brown eyes that made Avis like her on the spot, because they made her think of Muggins, and she asked if Madame Penionte was at home.

"Oh, yes ; she's always at home," returned the other, cheerfully. "Want to see her? All right, wait half a minute. I'll hunt her up. You can come, too."

Avis followed her into the low, dim vestibule, and waited, while her new acquaintance vanished into unknown regions, calling in a full, clear voice :

"Oh, Madame! Madame, dear!"

After a little delay she returned laughing.

"She'll be here in a minute or two," she said, confidentially. "Just take a seat anywhere. Oh, look out for the enameled chair. It's cracked. You see, Madame's got her puffs in curl papers, and she doesn't want to come out until she's fixed.

She's awfully particular. Are you going to stay?"

"I hope so," Avis answered, simply.

"So do I. I'm the only one on the fourth, and it's so lonesome. You can get the hall room for a dollar. Good-bye. I have to be down at nine."

She nodded, and started for the door, but turned again, her hand on the brass knob.

"What's your name? Mine's Betty Morgan."

"Mine's Avis Randall."

"From the country?"

Avis flushed, and became a shade more dignified. It was terrible to look as if you came from the country.

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly. You were polite, and anxious, and I thought perhaps you were. If you get homesick, just have a good hard cry. It clears you out better than anything I know. I have only been here a little over a year. And, honest and true, it isn't nearly as hard as it looks. Good-bye."

She was gone, and Avis waited. For the first time since she had left Rook's Nest, her heart failed her, and she felt a lump rise slowly in her throat; but suddenly there was a soft footfall behind her, and she rose to meet Madame Penionte. A very stately, gracious old lady, as Mr. Keith had

described her, clad in dull soft black, with a white chiffon tie around her throat, a trifle awry as if it had been tied on in a hurry. Her eyebrows arched, the corners of her mouth turned up with a little half whimsical suggestion of a smile, her nose was as aristocratically aquiline as Marie Antoinette's, and the snow white hair was combed high from the broad, fine brow with many a puff and twirl. Truly a dame of high degree, Avis thought, and a dread flashed through her mind that the dame might possess the manner grande likewise, but when Madame addressed her the fear vanished, for it was in a sweet, mellow voice that might have come from some quaint old portrait, and under its spell Avis' embarrassment melted away. There was the merest suggestion of an accent, the roll of an r, or an odd, long drawn out e—e—e—e.

"You wish to remain with me," she began, gently. "And you are strange here, too? Is it not so?"

Then Avis told her brief story, that she was from East Elmore, that Mr. Keith had told her of Madame, and that she was a writer and had come to the city to pursue her profession there,—this last with a half unconscious throb of pride, and a squaring of her slender shoulders. At once Madame was interested and sympathetic. Keith? Ah, that

was a charming couple, the son, yes, yes, Allyn, that was it, he was ever so kind, so tender to his mother, and she, Madame Keith, ah! was it not that she was so fine, so much the lady. And now, Miss Randall was their friend, and would make her home with her? That was well. She had not so many young ladies now, only one in fact, near Miss Randall's age; that was Betty, or as Madame called it prettily, Bettie; and, as she said the name, a soft look came in her eyes, as though she loved it.

"Yes, I know her," Avis exclaimed, eagerly. "At least I met her here this morning, and she said that there was a room on the fourth floor near her. Could I have that?"

To be sure she could. And would not Bettie be, oh! so glad to have her, for it was lonely there by herself.

"And—and the board?" asked Avis, hesitatingly, as she rose to go up-stairs. As she spoke, she thought of her ten dollars, and it looked somewhat smaller. She had almost forgotten one had to eat in the city.

Madame smiled, and made a quaintly deprecating gesture with her slender blue veined hands.

"I do not give board, but Bettie knows. She will tell you all about how to eat."

Avis received this doubtful information in silent

wonderment, but said no more. Madame took a key, and Avis followed her up three flights of steps to the first door at the top. It was a long way up those three flights of stairs, even the first time, and seemed longer every time she climbed them in the weeks that followed.

“The way into my parlor is up a winding stair,
And I have many curious things to show you when you're
there.”

That was what Betty would sing when she ran up them, and it suited the long, narrow flights, twirling round and round until it seemed as though it must be Jack's Beanstalk, only there was no ogre at the top waiting for one. Nothing at all save a plain, narrow hall with three doors, opening off it, and an old-fashioned skylight overhead.

Avis found that her room was not at all luxurious; but it was the one spot in the city that was to be home to her, and it seemed good to have a place she could call her very own. She looked it over carefully. There was an oak three-quarter folding bed that just squeezed in the space between the doorway and the side wall, and she liked it because it had a full length mirror in it. Billie would have said that was just like Avis. There was a tall chiffonier, and a very small table, and a worn camp-rocker. Best of all, though, was the broad, double window looking out, not on the

street so much as on the city. There was precious little of the street to be seen, merely a bird's-eye view, but the world of roofs lay open to her, and a very interesting world it is, too, when one becomes accustomed to it, and can appreciate its peculiar beauties. Many a lonely evening Avis spent by that window before the frost came to blurr it, and the lights of the city would twinkle at her like loving eyes.

That first day passed simply. After a general freshening up of her toilette, her royal highness started forth to view her new domain. First of all, she had decided back at the Nest, she would visit the office of the magazine which had accepted her story, "A Prince in Disguise." Surely the authorship of a story in five chapters would entitle her to some esteem in the eyes of the publisher. And perhaps she could secure some good advice as to her new story, that wonderful story which was to thrill the world, and shower ducats on the little Nest.

She found the place without any trouble, a tall handsome building on Dearborn Street, and the elevator boy let her off at the fourth floor.

"To your right," he said, when she asked for further direction, so she closed her lips tightly, and entered the first door she came to.

"The editor?" repeated the girl at the tele-

phone switch board in answer to Avis' low toned query. "That big red desk down in the corner. Yes, the one with the rail around it."

The consciousness that this mighty unknown had actually accepted some of her work, buoyed her up, and she crossed the room to the desk whose broad back faced the room, with the mental vision of a tall, cross looking person with eye-glasses behind it.

When she reached the desk, she stood there gazing in astonishment upon the person perched in a big editorial chair. It was Betty Morgan. Betty minus the jacket, with papers pinned, girl fashion, around her sleeves to protect them from the dust.

Betty, with newspapers stacked about her in the liveliest confusion possible, with a paste pot before her, and a pair of scissors in her hands as she slashed with deadly precision into the columns of the press. When she recognized the tall girl in the grey dress, she smiled and nodded with quick friendliness.

"So you found me out so soon," she said. "Did Madame send you? Sit right down in that chair, Avis. I'm going to call you Avis, because we'll be awfully well acquainted by-an-by, you know. How did you find your way around town? Did you get the room on my floor?"

Avis took the proffered seat, and tried to look composed under this sudden tangle of circumstances. After she had caught her breath, she answered :

"I did not expect to see you at all. I came to see the editor."

Betty stared a moment, and then asked, serenely :

"Why? I'm the editor, or the nearest approach to one around here. I used to be Miss Ogden's assistant, and just look out for the letters and exchanges; but she left a month ago, and we use syndicate work now. So all I have to do is make up the pages, and that isn't a bit hard."

"Then it must have been Miss Ogden who accepted my story," Avis faltered. "'A Prince in Disguise,' was the name of it."

"Your story?" exclaimed Betty. "Forevermore! I wondered what you could do when I saw you this morning. Girls who come to the city, always have something they can do, don't you know. I thought I could model Goddesses of Liberty, and different things, but when you have to count the pennies, you forget about what you want to do, and skirmish around to find anything you can do. You're lucky to have a story taken. Are you as old as I am. Nineteen?"

"Only seventeen," Avis replied. "But I've

done a good deal of writing. I—I have a book with me.”

“That’s what they all have,” Betty remarked to the paste pot, a trifle sadly. “And you want to find a publisher, and you think you’ll find them waiting with bouquets and checks all drawn up, I know. Is it clever?”

“It isn’t half bad,” Avis said, bravely. “The name of it is ‘Lorraine’s Legacy.’”

“Pretty,” commented the editor, sagely. “Last one I saw was ‘Ethelberta’s Sister.’ There wasn’t any sister. It was all Ethelberta. But never mind, you may be a budding genius. Wait till to-night, and then I’ll look it over. I couldn’t take it here now, but I can tell you where to send it, and give you lots of pointers. Have you been to lunch?”

Avis had not, so she willingly accepted the other’s invitation to join her, and they went out together. It seemed novel to have so confident and fearless a guide as Betty.

“I know every one of the crookedey corners,” she said, laughingly. “And there are lots and lots of them. The dearest, funniest, out-of-the-way places that hardly any one knows anything about. It seems as if they all belonged specially to me. That’s the joy of being acquainted with the city, don’t you know? I’ve got my very own

corner in the library. Way, way up-stairs, at the top of the south rotunda there is a seat that looks as if it had come from some old Italian garden. That's mine. Then there's a place down by the lake shore, past the Institute, where there's the best corner to go and dream. Over the underground station, it is, and it looks like the battlements of a castle steep. And those precious lions in front of the Institute. Just wait till they know you so well that they wag an iron paw at you when you go by. And that bridge at Dearborn Street, bless it. You haven't seen it at sunset, have you, when you're all tired out and blue? Oh, I've got lots of things to show you. Here's my manger. Look out for the stairs."

She turned around an alley abruptly, just back of the Venetian building, and ran lightly down a flight of stairs into a café. There were little round bare tables here and there, and Betty paused a moment to draw a couple of glasses of water on her way to one of them.

"I like this place, cafetiera, they call it, because you can hustle 'round and help yourself," she said, adding confidentially: "And you can fill up gloriously on fifteen cents. Sit down here. I'll be back in a minute."

Avis obeyed, and leaning back in the chair, gazed about her with interest as she drew off her

gloves. It seemed queer to see every one helping themselves, some at the pie and cake counter, some over at the coffee and tea urns, but everything was exquisitely neat, and most of the patrons of the little restaurant were bright faced girls, chatting and laughing among themselves, and brimful of *bon camaraderie*.

Presently Betty returned, bearing deftly two minced ham sandwiches, a dish of pickles, two cream puffs, and some potato salad.

"There!" she said, triumphantly. "Isn't that a feast for thirty cents. Now talk and eat."

"Do you always eat at restaurants," asked Avis, remembering what Madame had told her, and thinking of her nine dollars or less. But Betty laughed and shook her head.

"No, ma'am. I can't afford it. I have my own café on the fourth floor. Wait till to-night," and she nodded, mysteriously, as she reached for a pickle. "Never mind me. Tell me all about yourself. Where did you come from, and why, and everything."

If Marjorie and Billie could have seen her royal highness, reserve and dignity tossed to the winds, eating pickles and cream puffs, and chatting to a stranger of all her pet plans and dreams, they would have been amazed. And while she talked on and on of Rook's Nest and of the mcragerie,

some way the lunch lost its charm, and her appetite failed her.

"That's enough for now," said Betty, finally, rising from the table. "You're getting choky and homesick, and it isn't a bit of fun crying down town. Wait till to-night."

After she had said good-bye, and started homeward, more than ever Avis' heart longed for a sight of the dear, merry circle of faces around the old kitchen table, and at last when she reached the little hall bedroom she sat down and wrote a letter to Marjorie. Not a long one, nor an interesting one either.

"DEAR MUGGINS," it read, "I am here at last in the city, and have a very nice comfortable room. It's all splendid, and I know I will succeed, but I am a little homesick just now." Splash number one. "Do not worry or imagine me scattered in little pieces under cars or wagons. Please do not tell Rob I am here. Kiss them all for me, and tell Billie to please not scold me and be cross." Splash number two. "I will come home some day.

Lovingly, your sister,

"AVIS NEWELL RANDALL"

After she had mailed it, the door was locked, and a desolate limp figure curled up on the bed in

the hall bedroom, and had a long, wretched cry all to herself, before she fell asleep. Dreams and publishers faded away, and in all the wide world there seemed no happy spot but the little despised Nest. Her royal highness was homesick at last.

CHAPTER XIII

A Guest From Boston

So the great day came at last, and instead of being a day of gladness, and bright hopes, it was a lonely, dreary day, for the shadow that had fallen so suddenly, had changed the Nest from a house of feasting into a house of mourning. The children stepped about on tip-toe as if Avis were dead, instead of only gone to win fame and fortune. It was Billie who broke the news. When morning came, and he awakened, Marjorie was herself again, only pale and very quiet, and there were dark shadows under her brown eyes.

"You must tell Dora and the others, Billie," she said, when he came out into the kitchen, while she prepared the table as usual. "I can't. But Billie," as he nodded, solemnly, and turned to obey, "break it gently, and don't scold Avis."

Billie broke it beautifully. He strode into the schoolroom with heavy, lowering brow, and warlike mien.

"Are you youngsters going to sleep all day?" he demanded. "Something's happened."

"Has she come?" gasped the Lamb, sleepily.

"No. She's gone!" returned the herald, loudly, his hands in his pockets, his feet wide apart. Three anxious, heavy-eyed forms struggled to a sitting posture, and regarded him in bewildered surprise.

"Whoth gone?" asked the Lion at last, and the answer came like a thunderbolt:

"Avis!!"

"Oh, forev'more," cried Winnie, and there being an immediate yowl of woe from the Lion, she recovered in time to join in the chorus.

But Dora took the shock differently. She was on the floor in an instant, and past Billie, flying out to the kitchen. Before she knew what had happened, Marjorie felt two plump, strong little arms clasped tightly around her neck, and Dora's wide open brown eyes were looking straight into hers.

"Honest?" she asked. "Honest and true has she gone?"

Marjorie could only nod assent, but the warm loving embrace which she received brought greater comfort to her in her trouble than any words could have done. No one, not even Billie or the Lamb, fully realized the ache in her heart that day, the utter loneliness that swept down on her when she looked at the closed desk in the schoolroom, or

the many little marks of Avis' taste and handiwork about the house. No one saw her kneel by the desk, and kiss its smooth surface, while tears splashed down and made round slippery little spots on the rosewood. No one saw her in the quietude of her own room, as she packed away Avis' treasures with tender care.

"I know she would not like Aunt Bethiah to have them," she said afterward to Billie. "And I mean to let her have this room now."

"But where are you going to sleep?" demanded Billie, anxiously.

"With Dora or Winnie," Muggins answered, wearily. "It doesn't matter," and Billie secretly worried as he saw the new tired look in her soft eyes.

"My, I hope Aunt Bethiah will be nice," he said to Dora, when all the work for the day was over, and they were ready to start for the station. Only the two girls and Billie were going after all, to welcome the guest. Reggie had labored nobly in the good cause all day, and had finally fallen in his tracks, a crumpled, tired little heap in the corner, fast asleep. So when she found him, Muggins took him in her arms, and undressed him, and the rest left her in the little sitting-room rocking him back to sleep, with the soft hazy shadows of the early November twilight closing round.

Mr. Rogers' double seated carriage had been borrowed by the intrepid Dora, and Darling was the charger of the occasion. It was a very attractive equipage that waited at Elmore station that evening, and a very cosy looking row of small persons that lined up when the first smirch of smoke stained the far off sky. All were solemn and anxious. The Owl's feelings were at such a point of tension that a crisis was imminent, but Billie scowled heavily upon her, and commanded order.

"If she's cross"—Billie began, under his breath, as the train drew near.

"What?" whispered the Lamb.

"I'll run away to Avis," he concluded, fiercely.

"And leave Muggins?" There was a world of scorn in his trusty comrade's tone; but already some passengers were alighting, and there was no chance for further talk. An old lady came first. But that was Mrs. Tracy, and the doctor was there to meet her. A young man with a traveling case followed. He took the hotel omnibus.

"Oh, dear," Dora murmured, as the last of the baggage was thrown out, and the train gave a warning whistle. "She didn't come."

"There's another," Winnie exclaimed, pointing her finger at a tall figure at the other end of the platform.

"It's a man," Billie returned. "Do you sup-

pose Aunt Bethiah Newell from Boston wears an overcoat and—and"—

He paused abruptly. The figure was coming slowly toward them evidently with a purpose in view. When the electric light fell full on the stranger, they had a good look at him. He was tall, but not thin. Just right, Dora said afterward, and he wore a dark grey overcoat, and a tall silk hat. The latter he raised when he reached the little group, and they could see his wavy, iron grey hair, and long moustache.

"Is Marjorie here?" he asked, and after a moment's hesitation, Billie plucked up courage.

"No, sir," he replied, his cap off in a hurry. "We're the rest. Muggins is home. Have you seen Aunt Bethiah?"

The stranger's face was very grave, and his voice tender, as he answered gently:

"Aunt Bethiah left me only a few weeks ago for the far country. It has made me very happy to take up what would have been her loving interest, and help you all. I am Uncle Harvey."

Billie eyed him doubtfully. It was hard to have everything turned topsy-turvy in a moment, but the more he looked at the firm, handsome face, the better he liked it. After a moment's hesitation, he grasped Uncle Harvey's hand with a warm clasp of hearty welcome. In fact, on the way

home, he found a chance to whisper in the Lamb's ear, that he rather liked him better than if it had been otherwise. Whereupon Dora waxed highly indignant, and wanted to know if he had forgotten that Uncle Harvey had been a cross old duffer once upon a time.

Marjorie was seated in the window watching for them. She had put Reggie to bed, and then had taken a final look around, thinking far less of the coming guest than of the bird who had flown. The trees were bare now, and the lilac bushes stripped of leaves, too, and the little Nest stood desolate, and quaint in its empty garden like some forlorn grey rabbit left out in the cold. When the carriage drove up the road from the ravine, she tried to pull herself together, as Billie called it, and look cheerful; but it cost a great effort, and she wondered, as the children had done, if Aunt Bethiah was nice.

It was all over in a minute. Billie took charge of the stranger, and managed the introduction splendidly.

"There isn't any Aunt Bethiah, Muggins," he cried, the words fairly tumbling over each other in his hurry to break the news. "Or at least, there is an Aunt Bethiah, only he's Uncle Harvey. See?"

Before Marjorie could catch her breath, the

stranger had kissed her, and then said, holding her at arms length :

"And this is Muggins, Princess of Rattletibang. I had expected to see a very dignified person, judging from Billie's letters."

"Oh, Muggins is never dignified," cried Billie, warmly. "Only her royal highness was dignified."

Marjorie glanced at him, pleadingly, but he went on :

"That's Avis, you know, Uncle Harvey. She writes stories, and things, and she's gone away to seek her fortune. And there's another, Reggie, and he's asleep."

Uncle Harvey was silent. There was an anxious look in the brown eyes of the princess, and he wondered what its cause might be. It was not until Dora and Winnie had said good-night, that he heard the whole story in sections from the man of the house and the princess. It was a sad, little story, and a trifle hard to understand rightly, for while Billie would dilate on Avis' general crankiness, Marjorie defended her loyally.

"What was the name of the magazine which accepted her story?" asked the old gentleman, with a half smile, and Muggins repeated it proudly, *The American Beauty*.

"Do you know it, sir?" Billie asked.

"Somewhat," he replied, polishing his eye-

glasses, thoughtfully, with a white, silk handkerchief. Then, after a pause, he turned to Marjorie. "I do not think I would worry over her, Marjorie. From what you have said I imagine she is self-reliant and resolute, and can look after herself very well. It will not last long."

"Then you won't help me find her?" and there was a tremble in Marjorie's voice, as she raised her head to look at him.

"Not just yet. Let her try her wings, as Billie says: You are certain to hear from her, and when I go to the city I can easily find a trace of her. You know I have come West on business as well as pleasure."

At this Billie's eyes opened wider. He had heard fabulous tales of the Newell wealth, and here it was all invested in Uncle Harvey. A sudden idea struck him, and he exclaimed, impulsively:

"Say, Uncle Harvey, didn't mamma have any share in Grandpa Newell's money?"

Marjorie stared at the wall. She could almost feel how the words struck Uncle Harvey, and yet her heart beat fast as she waited for his answer. So many times Avis and she had wondered why it was that Uncle Harvey and Aunt Bethiah were so wealthy, while their own dear little mother had no share in the Newell fortunes.

Uncle Harvey looked grave, and seemed to consider before he answered, slowly :

"No, Billie. My father was a stern man. He did not consent to her marrying Mr. Randall, and—and he changed his will after she came West."

"Well, it's a shame," cried Billie, hotly. "Bet if Grandpa Newell could see us poked away in this little place, all poor and everything, with no one to care for us, he'd have changed back. It isn't fair."

A slight flush tinged Mr. Newell's face, but he smiled kindly at the two, bright, anxious young faces upturned to him.

"I don't think it is fair either, Billie, and neither did Bethiah," he said. "That is one reason why I have come West."

CHAPTER XIV

Betty Morgan, Editor

"HELLO, hello, central!"

At the sound of the clear, ringing voice outside her door, Avis started up from her long sleep, and admitted Betty Morgan.

"Been pounding away for two whole minutes," the latter said, severely, as she took possession of the camp-rocker. "The idea of going to sleep in the day time. I almost begrudge the nights, they're so long. I'd like to be awake all the time. Your trunk's out in the hall. We'll have supper in my room, and then I'll show you all my treasures, and you can show me yours, all the Nest things, you know. And I want to hear that wonderful story, too."

Avis smiled. The mention of her story never failed to brighten her, and with Betty's assistance she drew the old black leather trunk into the room, and uncorded it.

"Let's wait till after supper before you open it," Betty said. "I'm hungry enough to bite

door-knobs, and besides, I want to show you my room."

It certainly was a wonder, that large back room, with its windows just catching a glimmer of Lake Michigan. To be sure the lace curtains were dingy with smoke and dust, and the furniture was the heavy old-fashioned plush kind, and the carpet was bald in spots, and shaved too close in others, but all the same it was a wonder. There was a marble washstand set in the wall, with a good-sized cupboard above it, and the latter was Betty's larder. Her hat and jacket were tossed over in a corner, and her sleeves rolled up in a jiffy.

"Now, first," she said, "we'll take the books off this table and draw it up beside the bed. I like it here because I can bolster myself up at the foot of the bed with a good book, and read, and lie there and nibble, and read until I'm sleepy, unless I go out somewhere."

"Where's the table-cloth?" asked Avis.

Betty tossed over the morning paper.

"Take that," she replied. "I've got a can of sardines left, and some crackers and cheese, and I'll make a cup of tea, and we'll toast the cheese."

After she had spread the papers out on the table, Avis gave up her share of work, and sat

down to watch Betty's busy preparations, wondering greatly at the revelations made. There was a plump, jolly looking little brown teapot which Betty fixed, and placed on a diminutive one-burner gas stove about as large as a saucer, which had a rubber tube fastened to one of the gas jets.

"Madame does not care if I use the gas," the cook said, while she sliced cheese into a little granite saucepan, and seasoned it lightly. "I have great feasts up here, and sometimes she comes up herself and joins me. She is only fifty, even if her hair is white, and she's the dearest, gentlest, old lady, so well-bred and refined. You may open the sardines. The can opener is over there under those magazines, I think. I left it there last time."

It was a delicious feast, a forerunner of the many which followed. Betty took possession of the end of the bed, and sat there in state, backed by pillows, and giving much advice to the "budding genius," as she still called Avis. The precious manuscript lay beside her, and she read a page now and then, while the author waited anxiously for her verdict.

"It's good," she said at last, waving a cheese sandwich solemnly at Avis. "It's first-rate, only a little too much in the clouds to be quite practical.



"THE PRECIOUS MANUSCRIPT LAY BESIDE HER"

Why on earth did you write a love story. Everybody writes love stories, but maybe this will go. Shall I go over it for you and fix it up? It ought to be typewritten, too."

"Oh, dear," murmured Avis, a little pucker of wrinkles coming on her forehead, as this fresh entanglement presented itself. "I copied it all so carefully."

"Of course, you did," assented Betty, heartily. "It's neat and pretty enough to be framed, but all the same that won't do these days. Everybody who is anybody must be up-to-date if they want to keep in line and win. I know. It took me three months to find out about things, and the right way to do them; and I don't believe I would have awakened up then, only that I was hungry. Were you ever hungry and couldn't get anything to eat?"

Avis hesitated, thinking of that first night, under the lilacs, but relief had come so soon, such a small experience did not count.

"Not really," she answered.

Betty shook her head sadly.

"It's awful," she said. "I get ten dollars a week now, but when I helped Miss Ogden, I got only seven, and I had to send some home, you know, so it used to be a tight squeeze sometimes."

"Did you ever read a cook-book," asked Avis, laughingly, as she suddenly remembered Billie's scheme, and when Betty said no, she told her all about it.

"I don't see how you could ever have had courage enough to leave such a dear, jolly crowd," the latter said at last, with a sigh. "If I had been so happy"—she paused, and her lips tightened slightly, then she went on. "I am an 'orfling,' as our office boy says. I don't even remember my father or mother; guess I grew like Topsy. I used to live in Michigan with an aunt, Aunt Felicia. She tried to be good to me, but she was an old maid, and never liked children, anyway, and she used to say that I was the cross she had to bear through life. She never would tell me about my father at all, only said, she was my mother's sister, and that mamma had died there in South Haven, and left me a baby with her. I've got mamma's picture, but none of papa, and Aunt Felicia always called me by her name, Morgan. Isn't it all queer. Here's the picture."

She rose quickly, and went over to the bureau. Avis followed, and looked at the photograph in the quaint frame of hand beaten bronze. It was a bright, pretty face of a young woman about twenty. Her hair was wavy like Betty's, and hung in long heavy braids at the back, and the eyes had

the same laughing twinkle in them from under the long lashes which Betty's had.

"Isn't it odd to think that she's my very own mother?" went on Betty, looking at the picture over Avis' shoulder. "She's so young there, only a year older than I am now. Sometimes I sit and look and look at it, and wish it would speak and tell me all I want to know. But I have always felt rather sorry for Aunt Felicia. I know I was a terror when I was little, and bothered her dreadfully. Did you ever sit on a fence and fish for grasshoppers on a hook? I used to, and that bothered her. I used to run away, too, and tramp and tramp away off in the woods, and everywhere, and she'd have to hunt me up, and I guess that bothered her, too. And I could never sit and braid rags for rugs, or do any of those nice sensible things she said she did when she was a girl, and she said I was slack, and gave up all hope. So I came away as soon as I could, but I send her money all the time, because she did try hard to be good to me, only she didn't know how to mother me, you know. That's all about me. Show me everything that came from the Nest, and we'll fix up the room. I've got some tacks."

After giving the table a hasty clearing, they returned to the hall bedroom, and before long Betty had mounted a chair, and was tacking up pictures,

while Avis arranged her pretty odds and ends around the bureau, and on the mantel over the folding bed.

"Say, are you very rich?" asked Betty, suddenly, after a long pause. "I mean, have you a good solid foundation of dollars to stand on before you earn any more."

Avis took her green leather pocketbook from the drawer and emptied its contents on the table.

"Eight dollars, sixty-three cents, and a button," commented Betty, pursing up her lips in surprise. "Four dollars a month for your room, four sixty-three left over for food, car fare, etc. You can't do it. That will last you about two weeks if you are very careful, and live on air and ginger snaps. Can you get any more from home?"

"No, indeed," cried Avis, proudly. "I wouldn't ask for a cent from them, and they don't know where I am."

Betty gasped indignantly.

"Avis Randall, haven't you told Muggins where to write?"

Avis shook her head.

"Then you must write now, right away—to-night. If you don't, I will."

"Oh, I'll write," said Avis, carelessly, "only I didn't want to before I had made a start of some

kind. I will send the story away at once, and find some work to do in two weeks."

Betty nodded her head approvingly.

"That's the proper spirit, madam. I had it myself until I came down to ten cents and a large appetite. Now, first, if you sell that story in three months, you may think yourself lucky, because most papers like the *American Beauty* accept one year, publish the next, and pay the next. Maybe not quite as bad as that, but almost. Miss Ogden always insisted on sending the checks out at once, but she was different. So I think that in two weeks you'll be in the town of worry unless something turns up."

Avis sat with her chin resting on her palms, regarding her advisor anxiously. She was startled and troubled, too, by what Betty said; but still she could not believe it. Of course ordinary writers had such trials. They did not possess such a treasure as the wonderful story which was to be bound in green and gold. Betty did not quite understand her advantage over the rest of the world, that was all. She smiled confidently, and smoothed down a dog eared leaf in the manuscript lying beside her.

"I think I'll be all right," she said, after a pause. "Where would you send it first?"

"East," returned Betty, promptly. "They pay

more money, and you stand a better chance. Chicago means well, but it's so afraid it may do something to be laughed at, you know, that unless some one knows how to coax it around, it's awfully chilly to anything new. Send the story east right away. I'll give you some names of publishers, and you can take your chance with the rest."

"I—I'd rather sell it here," said Avis, thoughtfully.

Betty drove in her last tack with unwonted vigor, and descended from the chair.

"Well, go ahead and do it your own way," she returned, shortly. "It's the only way you'll learn. I had to learn by experience, and so will you. It's late now, and you look as sleepy as an owl at noon. Good-night, sleep tight and cry all you can. If you get real lonesome, pound on the wall, and I'll come in." She crossed the room, and opened the door, nodding in her happy-go-lucky, friendly way over her shoulder, but when she saw the homesick look in Avis' blue eyes, she stopped short.

"You look like a lost kitten," she said, decidedly, "and aren't fit to be left alone in this little cubby hole of a room. Come on with me, and we'll make believe I'm Muggins, and you are under the four poster. Now, don't straighten up and look as though somebody had pulled your hair.

Come on and be sociable. Then to-morrow morning we can have breakfast together."

There was no loophole for refusal, and on the whole Avis was only too glad to have company on that first night. So it happened that there were no tears at all, and her royal highness slept as soundly as if the brown head on the next pillow was really Marjorie's.

CHAPTER XV

Letters

“ROOK'S NEST, Nov. 4, 1900.

“**MY OWN DEAR AVIS:**

“Billie brought your letters from the post-office yesterday, and I read them aloud to the menagerie after supper in the kitchen. Winnie and Reggie tore the envelope in two, and each has their share in their treasure boxes. I think the Lion stuffed his into the broken head of that old sawdust doll he loves so much.

“We are so glad you are homesick. I was afraid that once you were away from the Nest, and alone, you would be wrapped up in your work and would hardly have time to remember us. We are getting on splendidly. I gave Mr. Rogers the use of the barn for his stock during the winter, and in exchange have all the wood and vegetables we will need. I wish you could see Billie and Mr. Keith out in the shed chopping wood. He is so nice, Mr. Keith, I mean. I did not want to send the little ones way across the ravine to school, and so he has taken Billie and Dora in charge, and I have the Owl and Lion to teach. He comes over every evening.

“I have closed your desk, and packed away the things you loved. Do you wish me to send them to you? I hate to part with them. It seems as if they were all I had left of you. You do not know how much we miss you. Every once in awhile I find Winnie and Reggie off in a corner crying, all by their lonelies, and all the Lion thinks of is that the ‘dragonth are waiting to pounth on you in the awful

thity.' I tell them that your fairy godmother will keep watch over you. I only hope she will.

"Avis, dear, I send you the money you left in the sugar bowl. I cannot take it from you when I know how much you will need it. You know we are all well taken care of, and you are all alone. It seems to me as though you were adrift at sea, without chart or compass, and no pilot to lead you on. Do be careful, for little mother's sake. Just be strong, and brave, and for pity's sake don't go out these cold winter days without your overshoes. If you were taken sick way off there, I believe I would hire a balloon or a Bagdad carpet, or something, and come to you.

"Mrs. Rogers sends her love, and says, 'Bless her, she'll take the cake yet.' We had a letter from Rob. He is still studying at the Art Institute, but has been doing outside work for some newspaper, I forget which, and expects to secure a position shortly on the art staff. I have not told him you are in Chicago, but I hope you will meet him some day. I think, perhaps, he might be able to help you.

"I have apple pies in the oven, and the Lion just sat down in a pan of molasses the Owl had ready for candy, so I must go and look after my menagerie.

"Do write often and tell me all about yourself. The rest are all going to write to you, too. I am so glad you found a friend so soon. What fun you must have cooking! You know you never could bear to cook, or fuss over a stove, and it seems so comical to think of your liking it now.

"Write long letters.

" Lovingly,

" MUGGINS."

"CASTLE RATTLETIBANG, Nov. 4, 1900.

"HELLO, YOUR ROYAL HIGHNESS:

"I know I was cress that night, so I thought I'd write and say I am glad you're homesiek, and hope you will be all the time. Muggins has cried herself blue, but I told

her you'd swim all right as soon as you caught the stroke. Just look out for snags. They give you awful nips sometimes.

"The Enchanted Goblin swallowed the white mice, and tried the grey squirrel, and the squirrel got mad, and nearly bit his head off, and a weasel got Martha Washington, and all we found were the tail feathers, and Dora's written some poetry for her, too, and we buried the feathers, and put up a shingle side of George's grave.

"'She might have died of chicken pox,
She might have died of measles,
She'd have been laying eggs this blessed day,
If it hadn't been for weasels.'

"'So with tears we lay her low,
Of Martha we are bereft,
Beside George Washington's noble form,
Tail feathers are all that's left.'

"I think if Dora tried real hard, she'd make a splendid poet. There's a go to it you can't find in Longfellow, and she always gets the point without warbling about floppy willows, and gurgling brooklets and things.

"I like that Betty Morgan that you said could make Welch rarebit. You can tell her I say she's all right. When you come trotting home in your chariot of fire, please bring Betty on the back seat.

"Aunt Bethiah—(Muggins just looked over my shoulder and pinched my ear, so I'm not to write any more on the above subject.)

"I guess that's all. I hope you'll get on all right, but I don't think you will. You're not a good fighter, and you cry too much, but never mind. Maybe you'll come home with a putty medal yet. The Lion was going to write, but Muggins is trying to make him stop sitting down until she

can get the molasses off; he sticks to things, so I guess he'll wait until next time.

"So love and kind regards, from your brother,

"BILLIE WILLIAM RANDALL."

"P. S.—If you see any foreign stamps don't be afraid to send them. Muggins says if you want any cough medicine like Mrs Rogers makes, she'll send you a bottle. Rob's got some. If you see Rob, tell him not to forget yours respectfully,

W. R."

"DEAR AVIS:

"I'm in a hurry. I wanted to send you the turtle, but Billie said you'd make soup of it when your money was all gone, so I will keep it.

"Lovingly your affectionate, and devoted sister,

"THE LAMB."

"DARLING AVIS:

"I love you, and so does the Lion, and we want you so much. Please come home Christmas. There's a funny noise in the cellar, and we don't know what makes it. Billie says its rats, but I think it's a griffin with a tail. So does the Lion. I love you lots. Please get rich soon, and come home.

"WINNIE."

CHAPTER XVI

The Threshold of Fame

"Now, what are you crying for, madam. I never saw such a perpetual weeper in my life. Drip, drip, drip. Large, salty drips at morning, noon and night. Look here, Avis." Betty dropped her hair brush and turned squarely around to face the culprit. "You've got to show more plain, everyday grit. This is not a joke, neither is it a funeral. You've got to brace up, and get ready and charge on the enemy."

Avis sat on the window-sill, and looked out at the drenched, sloppy, chilly world that three days of November rain had made of Chicago. The budget of letters from Rook's Nest lay in her lap, and as Betty said, she had been having a steady, crying spell ever since she had opened them.

Avis was certainly low spirited; and, as time passed and she saw no signs of the golden future that she had expected to see open before her, she became more and more downhearted. Two weeks dragged themselves by slowly, and still no sign of hope or encouragement appeared. Under Betty's

direction, the story had been dispatched to a publishing firm in the city, and day by day Avis had waited in brave hearted uncertainty for a response.

Meanwhile the precious little stack of ready cash had dwindled down lower and lower, until the coming of Muggins' share had been a heaven sent relief.

At the end of the second week, Betty had proposed a plan that would be advantageous to both, and save a little of Avis' capital. Accordingly, the hall bedroom was given up, and the trunk moved into the large back room.

"It is ever so much better for us both," Betty said, decidedly. "You can pay half the rent when you have it, and when you haven't, I won't push the trunk over the banisters. And if hard times come, why, we'll fight them together, and poke the wolf away with our noble swords, the which are hatpins. That's bad grammar, I think, but it sounds well. So you've got to make the bed, and tidy up, as Aunt Felicia used to say, and sit over there by the window, and chew your pencil all day, while I go out to toil in the cold, cold world. It is getting cold, too. I shall certainly have to unpack my sealskin pretty soon. If you go out, remember what Muggins said, 'Don't forget your rubbers.'"

Avis had moved into her new quarters with a

decided sense of relief. Madame Penionte would come up-stairs sometimes, and glance in at the slender, solitary figure bending over the table at the window, and nod smilingly.

"Do not stir for me, dear, no, no. It is just to see that you are not lonely that I come. And here is the little cake of raisins for Bettie that she loves so much."

Always when she came it was with some little donation for them and a word of cheer for Avis, until the latter came to look forward to her visits, as most welcome interruptions in the long monotony of the day's routine. At first she had taken Betty's advice, and gone out for long walks; but these grew lonesome and tedious, and she preferred to wait until the latter's homecoming, when, after the happy, little supper, the two would go for a stroll northward to Lincoln Park, or eastward to the lake shore.

One day, toward the end of November, Betty came flying up the stairs and into the room like a personified tornado on a small scale.

"Prepare for a shock, ma'am. Leave that old stove alone and listen to me. We are not poor struggling geniuses to-night. We are of the elect. Don your violet velvet trimmed in golden butterflies, and order the pumpkin and mice. No, I don't want any supper. We've only got an hour

to get ready. Wash that smudge off your face and hustle. This is a jumping, joyous jubilee for we'uns."

"Is it theatre tickets?" asked Avis, forgetting the four dainty lamb chops cooking on the little spider, for under Betty's tutelage the seven o'clock dinner had developed into quite a formal affair. Once before she had come home singing a song of triumph, and waving a couple of tickets in the air. They were not box seats, but that night no one in the whole audience at the Grand Opera House had enjoyed "Cyrano de Bergerac," as the two, eager faced young persons bending over the rail of the second balcony. They had laughed with the knight of the nose in his valor and strength, gloried in his bold cadets of Gascony, and their exploits, and cried loyally when the leaves fell and the great soul passed away.

For days afterward Betty had gone about in a blissful state of rapture. She bought a copy of the book, a very modest, paper covered copy, and at night she declaimed its lines up in the back room, with the bed for a stage, and Avis for an audience, and they had resolved to adopt Cyrano's grand free philosophy of life for their own.

But to-night Betty shook her head.

"No, we can't afford luxuries more than once a year. This is an invitation to an informal recep-

tion and all that sort of thing at Miss Louise Elaine Wade's studio, Fine Arts Building, and everybody who is anybody in the literary, artistic, and newspaper world will be there, because Louise Elaine is a bright and shining light in said literary, artistic, and newspaper world. I don't know her, but Miss Ogden does, and she was up to see me to-day, and asked if I would like to go with her. And I said I would be tickled to death,—I mean—most delighted, only for my own budding genius at home, and she said tender climbing vines must be fostered, and for us both to appear on the threshold of Paradise at 8:30 sharp, and she would introduce us to Louise Elaine, and some of the other great ones of this mighty city by the Michigander Sea. So."

Avis gave a sigh of deep content.

"Have a chop?" she said, laughingly, rescuing the supper from a sizzled fate; and, after a glance at the clock on the mantel, Betty decided to partake. Then came the question of toilettes, and a most serious, momentous question it was under stress of existing circumstances. The grey dress was Avis' "bestest," as Winnie used to say, and Betty commanded that the long braids be "put up."

"Let me fix you," she said, and thereupon the soft blonde hair was twisted into a fluffy, puffy

knot at the nape of Avis' neck, and a transformation wrought.

"Now the grey; genius is always modest, and that long, narrow pink scarf you showed me the other day. That's it," and she passed the scarf twice around the slim throat, and tied it in two, dainty, loose bows, one beneath the other, and the long embroidered ends fell below her waist.

"There, I rather think that will do," said the self-appointed maid, critically, standing off to see the result. "Now, just wait half a minute for yours very sincerely."

A freshly laundered shirt waist hung over the back of a chair, a white creation of innumerable tucks, and rows of lace insertion.

"In a moment of rash extravagance I indulged in this beauty," Betty murmured, as she struggled spasmodically into it, and wrestled with a collar button. "Two, seventy-five out of my poor little ten a week. And a high collar, and a black satin stock. How's that. Does it look like the proper caper?"

She stood before the looking-glass in the bureau, arms akimbo, sternly scrutinizing the young person who scowled back at her.

"It's splendid, all except the collar," Avis said, thoughtfully. "That makes you look so cross and choky."

"Well, you have to wear one to make the ribbon stand up stiff," Betty returned, with a sigh of resignation. "Come on. It's late, and we can't afford to make a triumphal entré an hour after the time, when we aren't prodigies yet."

It was a clear, bright night, with a crisp, frosty sharpness in the air that made them walk fast and turn up their jacket collars. Crossing to Clark Street, they took a south bound cable car to Monroe Street, and then hurried across to Michigan Avenue.

"Don't you love the city at night?" Betty exclaimed once, pausing in her breathless pace to look back at the flashing lights toward State Street. "It always looks like a lot of fireworks to me. And don't you know, it makes one think of some great underground city, like those the gnomes lived in, as if the buildings were the knolls, and the lights the funny little firefly lanterns the gnomes carried."

"The Owl and the Lion would love you," Avis said, laughingly. "You ought to see their gnomome cave, as they call it."

"Maybe I will, some day," replied Betty, hopefully. "I feel as if there was a snuggley corner for me somewhere in the Nest, now. Here we are. Do you feel shivery? Is my collar all right?"

Avis answered vaguely. She was gazing around the long, marble hall, as they waited for the elevator. It was all so wonderful, this first, faint realization of her hopes. Here she was, on the threshold of a real, true literary coterie, received as one of the favored few. If Muggins and Billie had only been there to witness her triumph.

They stopped at the tenth floor, and went down the corridor, to where an open door emitted a bright glow of light.

"I know the place," Betty whispered. "Had to come here for Louise Elaine's picture to run in the magazine, under 'Women in Art.' Wonder if you and I will ever be under 'Woman in Art.'"

Avis would have hesitated a moment at the door, but not so Betty. She led the way into the wide cosy studio with an air as serene, and as much at ease as if she had been Madame herself. It was early. Only a few groups of two or three persons were seated here and there on the corner divans and tête-à-tête chairs, and Avis had an opportunity to take a quick survey of the room, while Betty glanced about for a familiar face.

It was delightfully arranged and decorated, and Avis' fancy leaped forward to the happy time when she, too, should reign in a real studio, and give receptions to the elect. The walls were covered with rich, dull, green burlap, that formed an affec-

tive background for a perfect whirl of posters, sketches, and here and there some famous bas-relief, showing white and cool in the flame of colors. A large alcove was half curtained off at one end of the room, and seemed to be a conglomeration of Persian, Indian, Japanese, and Mexican trophies, all united in the most charming cosmopolitan style. Beneath the oriental lamp which lighted this retreat, stood two ladies, and the instant Betty's eye spied them, she made her way to them.

"Miss Ogden," she said, laying her hand upon the arm of the taller one, "this is my friend, Avis Randall, of whom I told you."

Miss Ogden turned with a frank, kindly smile of interest, and took Avis' hand in a warm clasp. She was decidedly plain of feature, the latter thought, with a little feeling of disappointment. She was like Winnie in her love of beauty; but still, considering the smile and its effect, there was something almost attractive about the broad, firm mouth and light grey eyes which shone behind the rimless eye-glasses, perched atop an undeniably retroussè nose. But the fluffy, carelessly arranged hair was hopelessly red, not bronze gold, or ruddy blonde, but simply red, and Avis turned with a sense of relief to her companion who was being introduced as Miss Wade.

"Isn't she pretty?" Betty found a chance to whisper as they went into a tiny, inner room, and removed their wraps. "She makes me think of a little blonde *bisque* doll. I always expect to hear the joints squeak, or else hear her say *mamma* and *papa*. Come on, so we can see everybody. I want to get a front bench at the circus so I can see all three rings at once."

They found a cosy seat, banked higher with cushions, where after awhile Miss Ogden joined them, as the room began to fill up with newcomers.

"You must tell us all the famous ones," Betty insisted, "because this is our very first taste, you know, and we want to know when we see a lion. There's a man over there. The tall man with the bushy hair talking to Miss Wade. Is he a lion?"

Miss Ogden laughed.

"Dear me, no, but he's the keeper of quite a menagerie. That's Benson of the *Argonaut*, and you may walk on your tiptoes and roar for a week if you get an article in the *Argonaut*. There are not many real lions, Betty. The higher game leaves the jungle out West here as soon as it discovers it is worth being hunted, and takes to the mountains of New York. But there is plenty of loyal comradeship, all the same, only it seems

as if we were all a lot of students together, living on hopes and ambitions. There are so few great reputations really won and established here in Chicago. We have have lots of budding geniuses, lots of the true metal too, but no masters. Personalities count for more than actual reputations among us. Now that dear, little blue-eyed woman over there with the crowd around her. She only writes half column sketches for the *Journal*, but she is loved and admired for her own self more than if she had taken a Salon medal."

"Listen," said Betty, "some one is singing at the piano. That girl in red it is. I think she has started one of Eugene Field's songs."

In the lull of conversation that followed the prelude of the song, Avis' attention was suddenly attracted by a stranger who had entered quietly, and slipped into a seat near the piano, after interchanging a smile of recognition with Miss Wade, and the *Argonaut* editor. She could not see his face, but there was something strikingly familiar about the broad shoulders, and erect dark head. All at once a double longing came over her, first to disappear so that if her suspicion was correct she could avoid a meeting at all hazards, and second to see and to speak with him, if it was indeed Rob. The tears rose suddenly to her eyes, and the homesick lump, as Betty

called it, filled her throat. She wished that the girl in red at the piano would not sing such a plaintive, sad little song. It was enough to make any one cry. But the voice went on, and the low, sweet music filled the room, and under its spell the whole studio faded away, and in its place, like some far off beautiful mirage, was Rook's Nest, tumble down and quaint among the tall lilacs, nodding protectingly around, and there were faces at the windows, anxious, loving faces from Muggins down to the Lion, all watching the road that led to the ravine for the return of the runaway.

The music stopped with a low, tremulous chord, and before it had died away Avis raised her head, and met the gaze of Red Rover fixed steadily upon her.

CHAPTER XVII

The Cellar Spook

It was after supper at Rook's Nest. Dora and Winnie were wrestling with the dishes out in the kitchen, and now and then came the sound of a dull thud as Billie dropped an armful of wood behind the cook stove.

"Bring in plenty, Billie," Marjorie called from the sitting-room. "Frost to-night."

Uncle Cherrington's easy chair had been through a rejuvenating process, thanks to Billie's deft tacking, and now stood in the place of honor before the open grate. It was reserved exclusively for Uncle Harvey's comfort, but at present the Lion lay curled up in its depths like a kitten, while Mr. Newell paced to and fro the full length of the room and back to Marjorie's sewing-table. They had been talking seriously, at least Mr. Newell had, and Marjorie's face was very thoughtful as she bent over the pile of stockings in her lap and worked out the puzzle of assorted sizes.

"You can't go on living like this," Mr. Newell was saying, gently, but firmly. "Billie is fourteen

and must be sent to school. I will invest what would have been your mother's share of the money and property of the Newell estate for all of you, and you can live on the interest very comfortably, but surely not here, Marjorie, my dear. Not in this old rickety place, when I wish you to return East with me and help to make my great, lonely home bright and happy."

"But, Uncle Harvey, you don't understand," Marjorie protested. "This is all my own, and I love it so. I can't bear to leave it all behind. And truly, I can manage splendidly, as you say, on the interest of the money, and even if Billie was to go to college, I could stay here with the menagerie."

"It is of them you must think most," interposed Mr. Newell. "The burden is too much for a young girl like you to bear. I shall stay here a while, at all events, so you need not begin to worry so soon." He came across the room to the armchair, and leaning over the back, looked down at the Lion, cuddled there in his white nightgown, fast asleep before the fire, and a tender, softened light shone in his eyes, as he added, "It would be very hard for me to leave you all now, and to go back alone. I did not know how lonesome and self-centered my old life was until I entered Rook's Nest."

Marjorie was silent. She did not feel as though she could make any reply to his proposition until she had consulted Billie. Since Avis' departure, he had become her chief counselor, and grand vizier on all questions relating to the welfare of the kingdom of Rattletibang. She was very silent and quiet, therefore, until Mr. Newell took his lamp from the table, and bent over her to say good-night.

"Don't worry, little girl," he said, kindly, stroking the tangle of brown curls that would break away from the restraining hairpins which she had donned at Billie's earnest behest. "Do what you think your mother would have wished. I have considerable business on hand to-night, and papers to glance over, and letters to write. I may remain over in Chicago for a week or more."

In an instant Marjorie's face was radiant with hope and interest. She had almost forgotten the trip her uncle had been planning.

"Oh, Uncle Harvey," she exclaimed, dropping stockings, darning ball, thimble, and all, in a heap on the floor. "Couldn't you try to see her—Avis, I mean, just to be sure she is all right, and—and not in need of anything? I would give anything to know. With Christmas coming on, just think of all of us happy and comfortable, and perhaps

she only writes that she has plenty so as not to bother me. She is very proud."

Mr. Newell smiled.

"I will try to bring back good news of her," he replied. "I will look her up anyway, while I am there. Billie, boy, bring a good-sized log for the fire here. It is too low for the Lion to sleep by."

He bent over and kissed Reggie's rosy cheek, and called good-night to the others as he crossed the entry to the four-poster room which had been turned over to him entirely.

Billie came in whistling softly, the big log on his shoulder, and little, brown chips of bark clinging to his jacket, and even in his hair. The fire sprang up, and gave the new log a warm welcome. After a few pokes at it, Billie settled himself full length on the floor, and looked up at Marjorie.

"You and Avis always look at the fire as if you saw things," he said, at last. "Hobgoblins or something. What is it?"

"I don't know," Marjorie raised her head, smilingly. "I was only thinking of Avis. Uncle Harvey says he will look her up next week when he goes to Chicago."

"And precious little thanks he'll get from her royal highness if he does," quoth William, sagely. "I've got an idea that she and Betty get along

great together. I like that Betty, She's a brick. She'll brace Avis up, bet a cookie, and teach her the stroke. If I were Uncle Harvey— What's the matter?"

He turned sharply at the sound of feet, tip-toeing along the entry way from the kitchen.

"Sh!" whispered Dora, warningly, as she and the Owl made a stealthy entrance. "It's there again. Right in the same place."

Marjorie's eyes met Billie's in an anxious flash of comprehension, and she rose resolutely.

"It's only the wind," she said, firmly, taking the light in one hand, while the rest clustered closely about her as she started for the kitchen.

"The wind, only the wind," echoed Billie, solemnly. "It's Hansel and Gretel eating our gingerbread house up. Wouldn't her royal highness have seventeen fits if she were here now, and could track the ghost to its hidden lair!"

"Billie, be quiet," said Marjorie, in an undertone. "I want to listen. Dora, dear, you and Winnie run back to Reggie, please."

"I want to stay with you and Billie," returned the Lamb, rebelliously; but the Owl, after a fearful glance over her shoulder, fled back to the shelter of the sitting-room, and nestled down beside Reggie, her big, blue eyes wide with wonder, her ears strained to catch every sound.

"It's over there," Dora said, pointing to a dim corner near the pantry door, and Marjorie deliberately set the lamp down, and went over to the place designated. Then they all held their breaths and listened.

There certainly was a mystery in the heart of Rook's Nest. In the silence of the old kitchen they could hear distinctly the strange indefinable sound, but whether it came from floor, walls or ceiling, it was impossible to say. It was not a knock, nor a whistle of wind. It was more like the muffled sound of guns, like the dull, faint boom of cannon miles and miles away.

It was not the first time they had heard it. Every night for several weeks past it had sounded in the same spot in the kitchen, and during the daytime, as Marjorie went about doing her work, she sometimes fancied she could hear the queer, hollow, faraway sound.

Uncle Harvey had heard it, and laughed in his amused, doubting way.

"Wind or rats," he would say, shaking his head, laughingly, at the troubled faces. "Either a hole in this Rook's Nest of ramshackle boards forms a trumpet for the wind to blow through, or else it is the Enchanted Goblin turned loose. Marjorie, you're growing nervous in your old age."

Marjorie would join in his laugh, but still have

the same wonder in her heart as to what the strange noise could be.

To-night after a prolonged stare at the corner, Billie suddenly mounted a chair, and held one ear to the wall.

"It isn't there," he said. "And there isn't a sign of an attic overhead. Spooks like attics. Maybe they dance jigs on the roof in the moonlight."

"Don't be funny. Try the floor," answered Marjorie, severely.

But Billie was already on the floor, one ear laid close to the cracks of the trap-door which led to the little cellar under the kitchen.

"Sh!" he whispered. "I've got the spook. He's down with the turnips, bet a cookie."

In a moment all three were listening at the cracks, and Marjorie gave a startled gasp.

"Why, it is down there, Billie."

"'Course, it is," retorted Billie, serenely. "I knew it all the time. I'm going down. You hold the light, Muggins."

"Wait till I call Uncle Harvey," said the latter, but Billie waxed indignant.

"Don't you dare," he commanded, sternly. "I'll manage this my own self. Give me that poker. There! Charge Chester, charge, on Stanley, on! Muggins, for pity's sake don't let that trap-door fall on my topknot, and please hold the light low."

"I'm coming after you," said Marjorie, gathering up her skirts in one hand. "Dora, you attend to the door, and don't get frightened, mind."

"Whose 'fraid," returned the valiant Lamb, stoutly, although her heart beat fast, as Billie cautiously raised the door, and took a preliminary peep into the dark depths below.

"Come on," he whispered, grasping the poker firmly, and together the two went slowly, step by step, down the steep but short flight of wooden stairs that led to the small cellar. At the bottom they paused, and Marjorie held the lamp above her head, so as to let its light shine full on the whole place. It was a mere excuse for a cellar, just such a cobwebby cubbyhole as one would expect to find under Rook's Nest. When harvest time had come, Billie had made an effort to clear out some of its rubbish and dust, and the floor, which was plain earth, had been swept and smoothed over, and some planking laid in the corners to accommodate the winter store of vegetables. The latter was all the cellar contained, unless one took into account the strange, shapeless pile underneath the chairs. Since cold weather had rendered indoor existence a necessity, Billie and the menagerie had found considerable trouble in disposing of their cumbersome treasures.

"There are whole stacks of things," Billie explained, loftily, to the indignant princess of the realm, "that you have to keep somewhere because they may come in handy some day. What would you have done the day the leg came off the stove if I hadn't saved up all those old bricks? Where would your old kettle have been if it hadn't been for that silver hatpin Avis threw away, and I melted up for the hole in the spout? How about your old tub when it went to pieces, if I hadn't dropped those iron hoops into the cellar? What would you have done for a china closet if I hadn't kept those soap boxes you wanted to use for kindling wood? No, sir-ree. If anybody finds anything and doesn't know what it's good for, just let them drop it down under the cellar stairs until we find out we need it. Like to know what a lot of girls would do, anyway, trying to keep house without a man around."

Now that the cellar had become a place of mystery, Billie's interest, after wandering from potatoes to turnips and cabbages, centered on the pile under the stairs.

"I don't hear it now," said Marjorie, in a whisper, but Billie rounded the corner of the stairs, cautiously, and bent over the pile with poker upraised in one hand as if he expected to harpoon an escaped whale. All at once, even as they stood

waiting, there came the strange noise directly beneath the heap of odds and ends, as though it came from the bowels of the earth.

"Can you poke it, Billie?" asked the Lamb, anxiously, her head appearing over the edge of the kitchen floor, above, and wagging at them with alarming looseness. "Shall I throw down the broom?"

"Go back. You look as if you were beheaded," ordered Billie. "No, you needn't throw down the broom, or the clock, or anything else. Just keep still. Hold the light low, Muggins, while I dig a little."

"Under those boxes, Billie," said Marjorie, her face flushed with excitement, as she pointed to the spot where the noise seemed to come from. "Clear those away first."

Billie promptly proceeded with all diligence and caution to push aside the medley of tin pans, soap boxes, and different things, until he had cleared away a space of several feet, and revealed the bare earth beneath. The noise ceased for a moment, then recommenced, a faint, dull, indescribable sound, that came from the ground itself.

Marjorie looked at Billie in consternation.

"What do you suppose it is?" she exclaimed. "A volcano?"

"Maybe," replied Billie, staring solemnly at the

ground. "It sounds as if it could blow up if it wanted to. Now it's gone again."

This time the noise did not return, and after waiting for awhile in vain, the two explorers gave up the quest, and went up to the kitchen with grave faces. Marjorie set the lamp down on the table, and met Billie's gaze with her eyes full of questioning concern.

"It would frighten Winnie and the Lion if they knew," she said at last. "Don't tell a word about it, Dora."

"And don't tell Uncle Harvey, either," rejoined Billie, firmly. "Let's wait till he's gone, and then dig."

So with this resolution the matter was let rest. There was a heavy snowfall that night, and strange to say, the mysterious sound was not heard again for several days, whereupon Billie and the Lamb pondered, and puzzled, and went about as if weighed down by the state secrets of a nation. But Marjorie was too much absorbed in Mr. Newell's departure for Chicago to think of anything except that he would find Avis, and bring back definite news of her. They all went to the depot to see him off, and the parting was as affecting, so far as the menagerie was concerned, as if he had been going to the South Sea Islands.

"Don't forget your promise," were Marjorie's

last words, but they were lost under a deluge of desires from the menagerie, called recklessly after the moving train.

Billie was the only one who stood aloof. When the train had disappeared behind the line of trees in the distance, he heaved a sigh of relief, and smiled wisely.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "we will return to our wigwam, and hold a solemn pow wow."

"Danthing, Billie?" cried the Lion, suiting the action to the word, by capering joyously around the platform, at the imminent risk of breaking his neck on the rails below.

"No," replied Billie, with a gleam of anticipation in his eyes. "Digging."

CHAPTER XVIII

In the Fourth Floor Back

"MISS OGDEN, do you know that girl in red?" Betty exclaimed, warmly, as the music ceased. "I think she must be splendid, or she could never sing like that. See, every one is crowding around her. Can't you introduce us, too?"

Miss Ogden readily assented; but Avis pleaded her preference for her corner, and they left her alone. The next moment Rob had crossed the room eagerly, and taken the vacant seat beside her, his brown eyes full of gladness.

"How on earth did you happen here?" he asked, and she noticed that his old shyness was gone, so far as she was concerned. "I hardly knew you at first, with your hair twisted up that way, and you look as if you were used to it all."

"But, I'm not," she answered, laughingly. "It is my first real good time, and I don't feel a bit used to it. It makes me wish I had done something wonderful, and that everybody knew me or wanted to know me, don't you know? I feel out in the cold."

"So do I, a little," said Rob. "I only know Miss Wade and Mr. Benson. He looks fierce, but he is not, not a bit. He gave me my first lift in pen and ink work a month ago. Nothing special. Only a little odd bit now and then to illustrate in the *Argonaut*, but he thinks he can get me on the *Times-Herald* this month, and then I shall feel as if my fortune was made already. What are you doing in Chicago, Avis?"

Avis flushed, and a wave of the old pride swept over her. How could she tell Rob Rogers of the fourth floor back room, and all the petty privations that were stealing down on her, and the almost hopeless collapse of her air bubble of success.

"Still writing," she replied, with an attempt at carelessness. "It is pretty slow work—fighting, isn't it? Everything looks so different seen from a distance."

"I know, from East Elmore." Rob was silent for a moment. Some one was going to recite, and he leaned back among the cushions and listened, with his thoughts flying like birds to Rook's Nest, and Marjorie. What ought he to say to Avis, now that he had found her by accident? Marjorie, in spite of Avis' request to the contrary, had written a fervent appeal to Rob in this wise:

"If you do find her, Rob, look after her for me.

Find out if she has plenty, and is comfortable. Ask her if she is happy, and if she misses us or not. And whatever you do, don't lose track of her after you have found her. If I thought she were in need, I would send her a barrel of things, and then come on top of them myself."

Rob looked at Avis' clear cut profile to-night, as she turned her head to catch a glimpse of the speaker's face, and wondered how he could ask her point blank if she were in need, for there was an older, more independent look in her eyes, and the small, firm mouth was closed more resolutely than ever.

"Where are you living?" he asked at last, when the monologist had finished, and the hum of voices rose again on all sides. "I am on the South Side. Hall bed-room, and a fifteen cent restaurant around the corner. Don't you ever think you'd give your little finger nail for a good square meal at home? I do. Billie writes often to me, and I have not got over the homesick feeling yet. Have you, Avis?"

Avis sat with downcast eyes, her hands clasped closely together, her one great longing that she would not break down and cry then and there; but all at once Betty's merry, brisk voice broke the awkward pause, and she welcomed her eagerly.

"Rob Rogers?" repeated Betty, with her frank,

bright smile, as she took in the stranger's general appearance with one quick glance of her brown eyes. "I've known you ever so long, and you look even better than I expected you would, from what Avis told me."

"I don't think I would like to hear her unbiased opinion of me," answered Rob, with a laugh that covered the underlying embarrassment of his tone. "We were never very good friends."

"No," returned Betty, in a burst of confidence, that made Avis long to shake her, or throw the cushions at her in a fit of desperation, that would have done credit to the Lamb. "She doesn't approve of you, exactly ; but still your coming to the city, you know, has made you a little more interesting. But one can never tell. You may be like the man with the bushy hair some day, and Avis and I will be still pegging along"——

"Betty," exclaimed Avis, suddenly, "Miss Ogden is trying to catch your eye. She wants to tell you something," and she arose to accompany Betty.

"When will I see you again?" asked Rob, rising also and looking down on her with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes that sent the last friendly impulse toward him from her heart.

"I don't know," she answered, briefly. "I am very busy, and have no time to spare, and suppose it is the same with you."

"I always go the rounds of the art galleries and Institute on Saturdays," said Rob, quickly, forgetting all save Marjorie's injunction not to lose track of her royal highness. "It doesn't cost anything, and it keeps a fellow in line somehow. Wouldn't you like that?"

"No"—began Avis, but Betty glanced over her shoulder, with a friendly nod.

"They're great," she said. "We always do them Wednesdays. Good-night."

Miss Ogden was waiting for them in the oriental corner, and there was a troubled look in her kindly grey eyes that bothered Betty at once.

"Anything I've done?" was her first anxious query.

"Oh, no, no, girlie, of course not," answered the other. "Only I've something to tell you that is very unpleasant."

"I know it isn't becoming," Betty interposed, in a tragic whisper, as she gave her high collar a tug. "And I feel as if I were being guillotined by slow degrees, but it's the style, and I can't help it. You ought to sympathize and not pounce on me like this to scold."

But Miss Ogden only shook her head a trifle sadly.

"It isn't a joke, Betty, it's business. I am coming back to the *American Beauty* next week."

"As editor?" The smile died away from Betty's face in an instant, as she asked the question.

"Yes, they have decided to give up the syndicate service, and go back to the old way. The publisher from the East is coming on Monday to discuss the change and make arrangements."

"Well, will I be needed then?" There was not a tremor in the steady, resolute voice, although Betty knew all that hung on the answer.

"I hardly know," answered Miss Ogden, reluctantly, laying her arm around Betty's shoulders. "That will be decided next week. I hope so, and I will do my best for you. I am more sorry than I can say, Betty. Why don't you try the newspapers?"

Betty shook her head bravely.

"Don't bother about me. I always find a way somehow." Then a sudden gleam of hope flashed across her. "If you give up the syndicate you will go back to the old writers, won't you? Well, then, why can't you look at Avis' new story, and see if you can't use it?"

Miss Wade was coming toward them, and Miss Ogden barely had time to assent, before she had to accompany their hostess over to another group.

"It can't be helped," Betty said, choking back

a sigh. "But we'll have to live on hope and gingersnaps unless something turns up."

"What if she accepts my story?" asked Avis, hopefully.

"Then we will live on chocolate creams and salted peanuts, and go to the theatre once again, and buy Madame a new pair of white gloves. She says she can stand anything in life's adversities, except having her white gloves give up the ghost. 'It is not zat zey are so grand, Bettee. It is zat zey are so much ze gen-teel.' That is what she says, and I understand, but the great point is this, Avis, my child," and Betty thoughtfully accepted, as she spoke, a glass of lemon ice from Miss Ogden's hands, when the latter passed them, laden with ices. "What if she does not accept it, then we will have to catch the first soap box we see, turn it into a hand car, and work our way to Rook's Nest, and Muggins. Otherwise we won't eat turkey for Christmas, that's all."

It was a dubious ending to the evening's pleasure. Although Betty tried to keep up a brave heart, and laugh over the loss of her position, the smile would vanish from her face every now and then, and Avis would see the puzzled, worried shadow in its stead.

Mr. Benson had taken Rob in tow, and they did not have any further chance of speaking with him,

much to Avis' secret relief; but when they were once more in the street car, homeward bound, Betty suddenly exclaimed after a long pause:

"Why don't you like that Rogers boy? I think he is splendid."

Avis was startled into what Billie would have called her clam-shell state of pride. She simply shut herself up in a shell of reticence and resentment, and refused to hold communication with ordinary people, who failed to see sense in her fancies. But Betty was not one to be shut out.

"Oh, you needn't freeze up, Avis, and look so cross. He is a splendid boy, and you treated him queerly, and I want to know what the trouble is. You never said much of anything about him, at all, not even that he was in Chicago. Why?"

Avis looked at the frank brown eyes, that seemed to see through and through her, and remembering Marjorie's eyes, so like them, felt herself thawing helplessly under their direct questioning.

"Why, because I don't like him," she answered, positively.

"But why don't you?"

"I don't know. Oh, yes, I do, too," as a flash of memory came to her. "Billie said once that

Rob thought I was—silly.” She jerked out the hated word, with an effort, that brought a half sob with it, and Betty nodded in wise comprehension.

“I see. You think he is fine, just as I do, but you like him so much, and think he is so splendid, that you can’t bear to have such a nice boy think you’re silly. Is that it?”

“No, it is not,” said Avis, indignantly, her cheeks flushing suddenly with anger, and hurt self pride. “He thinks my ambition is silly, my work silly, everything I say, or do, silly! He thinks there is no one like Muggins, and that she’s a martyr, and I’m a deserter! Now, don’t you see why I don’t like him?”

“I wonder if it wouldn’t be best for us to move into the hall bed-room, at one dollar per week,” remarked Betty, serenely, and the subject was dropped without another word.

Then began several weeks of battle. When Betty went down to the office of the *American Beauty* on Monday, she found Miss Ogden installed in her old place at the big red editorial desk, and only a prospect of about ten days’ work left for her, while the new editor needed an assistant in making a change from syndicate service back to the old way of dealing directly with the writers. She noticed an air of unwonted bustle

and preparation about the place, and Miss Ogden said the manager and publisher was expected from New York any day.

At the home on Dearborn Avenue, matters went from bad to worse. Madame Penionte was interviewed on the gravity of the situation, but she vowed that if they dared give up their large back room for the cheaper hall bed-room, she would grow grey in despair, and Betty must pay her but one dollar for rent of the big room. So they kept their old room, and the precious story of "Lorraine's Legacy," which had come back from a local publisher, express collect, was at once consigned to Miss Ogden's tender mercies.

As soon as her ten days' work was finished at the *Beauty* office, Betty began to take a deep interest in the "want ads" of the various papers.

"You mind your own affairs, Avis," she would say, blithely, "and let me manage the work part. I can find something to do."

But after a day or so, Avis laid aside her pen and paper, and started out alone to find some work. She had several "ads" to answer, for office work mostly, and had spent her first week's salary ten times over before she had even reached the first place. There were about thirty girls standing in line before her, and she turned away with a curious feeling of doubt in herself that was

entirely new to her royal highness, and would have made Billie rejoice greatly.

When she reached home, after tramping to and fro nearly all day, she found Betty fussing over the little gas stove.

"Think you're very clever at stealing a march on me, don't you?" she called over her shoulder. "Bet you went off without a sign of rubbers and the snow and slush is a foot deep down town."

"They're not very wet," said Avis, ruefully.

"Don't talk back to me when I'm playing Muggins. Take off those wet shoes, and come and eat. I have a ten cent can of baked beans, and I am warming them up in the last of the catsup. We have got to eat crackers. The bread is gone."

She drew the little table up to its accustomed place beside the bed, and set the supper on it as though it had been a full course dinner. Avis was over in the big camp rocker, removing her damp shoes for a pair of knit bed-room slippers that Marjorie had sent her, and Betty's quick ear caught the sound of a cough.

"You've caught cold," she said, decidedly. "Now you can go to bed, and be dosed. I have some great, good news."

"Did you see Miss Ogden?" and a glad light of hope leaped into Avis' tired eyes. "Will she take the story?"

"Guess again," said Betty, trying to be cheerful. "I have a week's work addressing envelopes at the mighty wage of \$5.00, so we shall not starve yet awhile, that is, if we can live until pay day. Avis, don't."

But Avis had thrown herself on the bed and was sobbing bitterly. All her own failure swept over her in a moment, all the wreck of her beautiful hopes and dreams, and she felt crushed and defeated. Betty regarded her in silence for a while, and then went on serenely with her own supper.

"Cry," she said. "Cry hard. It does you more good than anything, and I know how you feel. Only do stay in the house, and keep yourself well, and let me do the tramping, because I'm used to it."

The following day Avis' cold was worse, and when Betty left at eight o'clock in the morning for her new position, she stopped at Madame Penionte's little suite back of the parlor and had a serious talk with her.

"I made her stay in bed," she concluded, "but her pulse is fast, and she coughs lots. Please do something for her, Madame, dear; hot ginger and goose grease, Aunt Felicia used to dose me with, but I suppose that's old-fashioned. There's some money for anything you need at the drug store."

and she laid on the table her last whole dollar without a qualm of regret, and walked the distance down town with fifteen cents in her pocket-book, and a world of love and hope in her heart.

Up-stairs in the back room lay Avis, sick and lonely. She could catch a glimpse of the world of roofs through the window, but it was a grey, snowy morning, and the prospect was far from being a cheerful one. She had promised Betty she would not cry, but the tears would rise up rebelliously, and wet her pillow. Only a few weeks to Christmas. She knew how Billie would hunt the woods for evergreen to trim up the Nest, and how busy Marjorie's loving fingers must be making little gifts for all her brood. They would all fare well this year, she thought, with Aunt Bethiah there. And she herself had been six whole weeks in her fairyland that had seemed so rich with promises, and yet not a single remembrance could she send home, not a trophy of her prowess.

"So it is Avie, who is ill," said Madame's sweet voice at the door, and she entered bearing a dainty, breakfast tray, and set it down beside the bed. "It is nothing, cherie," as Avis made a deprecating gesture, "but a slice of toast, with ze egg poached in cream on it, very choice. And ze coffee. Ah, Bettee say nowhere is zare such coffee as my coffee. And ze orange."

"Oh, madame, how good you are to me," Avis said, her flushed face full of gratitude. "But, honest, and true, I'm not a bit hungry."

"No?" Madame's eyes twinkled with amusement. "What if I have something zat make ze appetite?" and she held up a letter invitingly.

"Oh, you dear!" cried Avis, reaching for it, eagerly. "I'll eat—everything."

Madame laughed, and laid the letter in her outstretched hands, then quietly moved about, putting the room in order, and humming softly to herself.

The letter was from Marjorie.

"I suppose you are so busy with your precious work," she wrote, "that you hardly remember it is almost Christmas, but here we talk of nothing else. Mrs. Rogers was over this morning, showing me how to make mince-pies, and lots of things. I made two just to try, and they are so good that I am going to send one to you and Betty. Now don't laugh, perhaps it will taste good. Billie put the nuts around the sides of the box to fill up. He and the menagerie have a royal stock on hand, you know, and he wanted you to have some, too. Don't forget us all, Avis, will you, in the midst of all your success? Of course I know you are sure to have a splendid Christmas, but do please miss us a little. We want you home in the Nest so much"—

Avis could read no more. Madame glanced over her shoulder and saw the forlorn figure lying face downward in the pillows.

"Is it ze illness for ze home place, cherie?" she asked, in her quaint, twisted English, with a loving pat on the soft blonde hair. "Bettee says for zat, zare is nothing like one grand cry."

Avis nodded wearily. It seemed to her as though all life had narrowed down now to the "illness for the home place," and "one grand cry."

That night, seated on the topmost stair on the landing, Betty listened to the doctor's retreating footsteps with an aching heart, and wondered if people who were threatened with pneumonia ever died, and whether Muggins ought not to know.

CHAPTER XIX

The Princess' Treasure

THE snow that nearly submerged the little Nest in its mighty drifts remained for several days, and there being no return of the mysterious noise, Marjorie commanded that all efforts to discover its origin be postponed, and the energies of the Rattletibangers directed toward the preparations for Christmas.

There were wonderful secrets in the air. The Owl and the Lion chuckled over hidden mysteries in their corner, and Billie went about in a heavy, portentous manner, with a glue pot in one hand and a jack-knife in the other, and sought sanctuary out in the wood-shed. He and Mr. Rogers had gone out in the woods farther down the river, and searched for a Christmas tree; and, when it was finally selected, never was ye yule log of olden time hauled from its forest home with such jollification and shouting. Two of Mr. Rogers' big russet colored oxen were yoked up, and made the central feature of a triumphal procession to the

woods, Billie and the Lion astride their backs like bold caballeros. When the stately evergreen crashed to the ground, Dora and Winnie mounted its branches, and rode home enthroned like princesses; only as the Owl said, "It was a little bumpy."

Mrs. Rogers had invited them all to spend Christmas with her, and have the tree at the farm, but Marjorie said no. It might be the last Christmas they would spend in the little home that they all loved so well. So the tree was crowded into the sitting-room, and Billie and Mr. Keith fixed it upright in a box in the centre of the room.

"It looks as if a Hindoo wizard had been around and made everything sprout," Marjorie said, when the last yard of evergreen had been twined around the wall, and a wreath placed in every window.

"Bet a cookie her royal highness wishes she was home," Billie remarked, confidently. He had brought a big milk-pan full of pop-corn ears into the sitting-room from the kitchen, and seated himself on a stool near the fire to shell them. It was late in the afternoon. The sun shone redly through the rows of lilacs, and made the snow-drifts look like piles of strawberry ice-cream.

"Now, don't look out of the window and get

mournful," he added, hastily, as Marjorie walked over to the window without answering. "I wouldn't worry the way you do for anything. Didn't Uncle Harvey say he'd look her up?"

A dark, curly head was poked suddenly into doorway.

"Billie"——

"Go down cellar, and get some apples," commanded Billie, severely. "Get russets, and those little yellow sweet ones. I'm busy."

The head vanished.

"I'm going to pop this to-night," he went on, "all of it, so that the Lion and Winnie can string it for the tree. And Christmas we'll make pop-corn balls, and pull molasses candy, and have whole oodles of nuts"——

"Have what?"

"Oodles. Stacks, bunches, piles. Oodles sounds more than any of them. And apples, and dough-nuts, and"——

There was a wild scrambling in the kitchen, and a prolonged howl that only the Lion could be guilty of. The pan of pop-corn fell to the floor, and Billie stampeded madly toward the scene of action, with Marjorie following at his heels. They were just in time to see the Lamb emerge from the cellar opening on all fours, while the remainder of the menagerie had fled to a far corner.

"Now what have you done?" demanded Billie. "Scared a spider into fits?"

"You can go down after your old apples, yourself," returned Dora, haughtily, shutting the cellar door with a bang. "I won't go down there again for anything. It's there again."

"It is?" In an instant Billie was alert and eager. He raised the door and listened. The strange noise could be plainly heard, and Dora edged cautiously toward Marjorie.

"I'm going to find out about that this time, or go and be a soldier," announced the man of the house, resolutely. "Dora, get the big shovel from the wood-shed, please, and the hoe, too, to hack with. Come on, Muggins."

But Marjorie hesitated long enough to whisper something in Winnie's ear, something very important, for both she and the Lion donned their cloaks and caps, and started off without the knowledge of Billie, who was already down in the cellar pounding on the ground underneath the stairs. When Marjorie came down with one of the lamps, he had succeeded in loosening the hard, trodden earth considerably.

"Light the barn lantern, too, Muggins," he said, breathlessly. "I can hold that down low."

The large shovel and hoe were handed down by Dora, with the addition of an old pitchfork.

"To dag anything with," she explained. "Wish we had a spear or a tomahawk, or something that I could throw from up here."

"And stick me with like a bug on a pin," growled Billie. "Not much. Don't you dare throw even a clothespin this way. Hold the lantern low, Muggins, please."

The pitchfork did its work first. After Billie had thoroughly loosened the ground with it, he tried the shovel. Meanwhile the dull noise never ceased its strange, deep-toned grumble. Each shovelful of earth lifted brought the sound nearer, and Marjorie was as excited as Billie himself as the hole grew larger and deeper.

"Is the dirt getting hot?" called Dora, anxiously. "I shouldn't wonder if it were a volcano after all, should you, Billie?"

"Not a bit," retorted her comrade, as he made a mighty strike with the pitchfork into a fresh layer. It grated on metal and rebounded in his hand instantly.

"Look out!" Marjorie could not restrain the quick cry of alarm. Billie had dropped the pitchfork, and fell to shoveling vigorously until finally the shovel edge met with an obstacle, and then he took the lantern and knelt over the hole eagerly.

"What is it?" asked Marjorie, bending over his shoulder anxiously. "Can you see anything?"

"No, but I can feel something." Billie thrust his arm fearlessly into the hole. It was not quite a foot and a half deep, but the earth was hard and damp to the touch, and his hand rested on iron. He felt around it cautiously. It was round, and as large as the top of a tub. Where the iron ended, some substance equally as cold and resisting took its place, and this extended as far as he could feel, which was only a few inches beyond the outer rim of the iron circle.

"Wait a minute," he said. "There's a ring in the center of the iron, if I can only get it up."

"Let me try," exclaimed Marjorie, kneeling on the opposite side of the hole. Just as she did so, however, the noise came again, this time so near that both sprang back instinctively. At the same time they heard the kitchen door close, and footsteps overhead.

"Don't you want some help down there?" called Mr. Keith, as he came quickly down the stairs. "Won't you let the poor ghost rest in peace, Billie?"

"That's the liveliest ghost ever you saw, Mr. Keith," said Billie, seriously, leaning back to wipe his flushed, moist face on his coat sleeve. "Look what I've found."

After a minute's scrutiny of the hole and the iron disc at the bottom, Mr. Keith removed his

coat and went to shoveling vigorously, clearing a good space on a level with the circle at the bottom. Then he took the lantern and made a careful examination.

"It is the cover to something," he said, finally. "This outer rim is cement and rock. We can raise the cover, I think, Billie, by slipping the handle of the hoe through the ring and using it as a lever. It is oak and stoutly braced with iron."

"You're a jim dandy," murmured Billie, admiringly, as he obeyed orders, and took a firm grip of the handle. All at once the noise sounded beneath, and Allyn turned to Marjorie.

"Will you please go up-stairs, Marjorie," he said. "The children are frightened."

Marjorie obeyed the firm, quiet voice as willingly as Billie had done; although she knew the owner was not thinking so much of the children's fright as he was of her safety in case anything happened.

Allyn drew a breath of relief when she had gone.

"Now, then, Billie, boy," he said, resolutely, "a long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull with all your might. Steady."

As they raised the oak handle, the iron cover stirred with a dull grating sound, as if in resentment at this untimely disturbance of its repose. Harder, stronger yet came the force against it. It

lifted an inch—a foot—wavered, and finally fell backward with a sharp, metallic clang against the stone and cement, exposing to view a deep, dark aperture.

“Don’t lean over, Billie,” cautioned Allyn, quickly. “There may be poisonous gases down there.”

“It’s more like fresh air,” said Billie, amazedly. “There’s water, moving water, not still well water. Don’t you hear it?”

There was certainly the low, gentle sound of water lapping against the stone and cement masonry, and they could see it sparkle not five feet below.

“If we only had a sounding line,” began Allyn, eager as a boy over the discovery; but Billie called loudly:

“Muggins, tie a fork to the end of the ball of twine, and come down. It isn’t a well, is it?” he added, to Allyn.

“I don’t believe so,” the latter answered, doubtfully, peering down at the hole, and tapping the masonry as far as he could reach with the hoe handle. “Here’s something queer. It is like an old bucket chain fastened into the stone work. I shouldn’t wonder if this was the ghost.”

As he spoke the rusty chain swung slightly, and far down like an echo from a cavern, came the hol-

low dull noise that had been the cause of all the trouble.

Billie's eyes looked as if he expected to see a spectre rise at any moment and declare itself.

"Jehoshaphat!" he gasped. "Isn't that a wonder, though! It comes from the bottom, if there is a bottom. Hurry up, Muggins, with that fork."

Not only Marjorie, but Dora also hurried down the cellar stairs at the call. Allyn took the long line of twine from the former. It was more than ten feet long, and weighted with one of the heavy bone handled kitchen forks. He leaned over, and let it drop slowly into the hole, but before it had fallen seven feet, the line slacked, and the bottom was touched.

"Pull up the chain," suggested Billie, who had had his eye on it for some time. "It's swaying again. Is it heavy?"

"A little," returned the other, as he laid the improvised plumb line on the ground beside him, and turned his attention to the chain. "It feels as if it had an old water bucket on the end. Take hold, Billie, here it comes."

The two hauled at the heavy, rusty chain, and after a lot of scraping and dull thumping as something swung against the wall, the end was reached, and Billie seized the mystery boldly when it came to the top, and laid it at Marjorie's feet.

"There's your old ghost, princess," he said, in triumph. "And it doesn't feel as if it were full of dry bones either."

Wondering, the girls knelt beside the discovery, while Allyn held the lamp above them. It was an oblong iron box, severely plain, and from the padlock which secured it, was suspended a small key. The chain was hooked into a ring in the top, and Billie quickly unfastened it.

"Let's cover up the well or whatever it is," he said, decisively, "and go up-stairs with this. One mystery at a time is enough."

"Oh, yes," cried Marjorie, her eyes bright with excitement. "We will take it up into the kitchen."

With Billie's help Allyn swung the iron cover back in place, and they all followed the princess of Rattletibang up-stairs to see what her treasure box contained.

It was very heavy. Marjorie set it down on the kitchen table, and promptly inserted the key in the padlock. All at once she paused.

"Do you think I have any right to open it?" she asked Allyn, anxiously.

"No one has a better," he returned, quickly. "No one on earth."

"Oh, do stop fussing over rights, and open it," Billie protested, aggrievedly, and Marjorie hastily turned the key. It grated in the rusty lock,

turned, and she lifted the cover. A second box of black tin was revealed, but this only shut with a clasp, and when she had opened it, Marjorie stood speechless before it.

"Billie!" she exclaimed, and that was all. The person appealed to leaned over with eyes like glass marbles, and gave a whistle of astonishment.

"The old skinflint!" he cried, joyously. "Who'd have thought it of him? Marjorie, it's gold."

"All gold," added Allyn, lifting up a few papers from the top. "Twenty dollar gold pieces, and down here a few bills, fifty dollar bills."

"Eggs in the Rook's Nest," exclaimed Dora, starting in on her regular Feejee dance in the middle of the floor. "Muggins is rich, rich, rich! Did you ever see such a darling ghost!"

Marjorie stood with downcast eyes beside the table, looking at the neat, round piles of dull yellow that filled the box, and there was a bright red spot on each check. She looked from them to the eager faces clustered around, at Billie's homely, mischievous one laughing up at her, at the Owl's wondering eyes, and the Lion's chubby fingers reaching longingly over to play with the pretty pieces, then over at Dora, flushed and dimpled, and finally she met Mr. Keith's steady gaze.

"Do you suppose it is mine?" she asked.

He clasped the paper he had been glancing over closer.

"All yours, princess," he replied, confidently. "It goes with Rook's Nest to Marjorie Cherrington Randall. Listen to this." He opened the paper to read aloud the few terse lines it contained, in which old Uncle Cherrington had bequeathed his hidden hoard to the heiress of Rook's Nest.

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

"I, Cherrington Randall, in full possession of my faculties, and about to depart for Wyoming, do hereby state that the contents of this box represents my entire ready wealth; the same in case of my death to revert to my niece, Marjorie Cherrington Randall, with the estate on which it is found. May it bring her the happiness denied to me.

"CHERRINGTON RANDALL."

"Bully for the old boy!" murmured Billie, ecstatically; but Marjorie stood up on one of the old kitchen chairs and held out her hands for silence.

"You dear, darling children of mine," she exclaimed, joyously. "It's all yours, too, and we'll have the most glorious time that ever was, and hunt up Avis, and bring her home, and send Billie to college, and never, never leave our blessed Rook's Nest!"

"Polliwogs!" cried Billie. "March!"

All four formed in line as they had done on that other memorable day when the council of state was held in the old home, and they marched

around the table and chair with a new battle song
on their lips.

“ We'll never, never, never,
No, we'll never, never, never,
Oh, we'll never, never, never,
Leave our blessed Rook's Nest.”

CHAPTER XX

Betty Enters the Arena

For several days the cloud hung over the fourth floor at Madame Penionte's. Betty dared not leave her position, or even neglect it, so she started bravely away from the sick chamber every morning leaving Madame in charge; for even five dollars a week seemed a very desirable possession under stress of present circumstances.

By the third day the fever was checked, and the cough better, and when Betty came home at night with tired, anxious eyes, she found the patient quiet, and out of danger from pneumonia.

"If she remain serene," added Madame, cheerily, nodding her white puffs at Avis, with comical severity. "She is to keep most serene, and composed, and not to worry, nor to weep, nor go out without the rubbaires."

"I'll keep her serene," said Betty, vigorously. "If she dares shed a single tear, I'll send for that Rogers boy. I saw him to-day. Now don't get red," waving her hand at the face on the pillow. "I didn't talk with him, or tell him that you were

sick, or anything. Just saw him sailing out of the Fine Arts Building about noon. I always eat my ham sandwich and lemon pie, in 2-11 time, so as to have a chance to run around to Michigan Avenue, and say hello to the lions and the lake front. He was walking fast and never even saw this child, but I heard from Miss Ogden that he got the position on the *Times-Herald*, so he is a rising young artist now and not to be despised. Here's something I found for you down-stairs. The expressman left it for your serene highness."

Avis' face brightened at sight of the generous sized package.

"It's the pie," she exclaimed, eagerly, "Marjorie's mince pie that she said she'd send."

"There, there, keep serene," called Betty, warningly, on her way to the little cupboard larder. "Madame and I can manage this trifle very well alone. Of course it's pie, and delicious pie, too; but invalids mustn't eat rich luxuries, must they, Madame?"

"Ah, but yes," Madame, thus appealed to, returned, warmly, as she saw the longing in Avis' eyes. "But a small piece, Bettie. When it is home pie, it is not pie, it is medicine."

So the precious pie was unwrapped with much ceremony, and partaken of in respectful admiration.

"Now, you are not to stir out of this room for a week or more," Betty said, the following morning, when she was laying down the law for Avis' future guidance in the path of health. "I have not written a line to Muggins about your nearly becoming an angel because you went out without your rubbers ; but you've got to behave, now, and not do any crazy thing to upset it all."

"And Christmas coming next week?" the invalid's tone was most beseeching and a little rebellious, but the oracle only shook her head relentlessly and waved good-bye as she passed on down-stairs.

So all during the week, Avis remained an unwilling captive in the back room, with Madame installed as a gentle but inexorable warden. So faithful was her care and nursing, however, that by Friday Avis declared herself fully cured, and when Betty came home that night, she found her "clad, and in her right mind," as the former expressed it. Later in the evening, when the two were alone, they held a consultation.

"You won't be fit to think of working for a couple of weeks yet, at the least," Betty said, decidedly, in a tone that brooked no argument. "We have been practically living on Muggins' mince pie and Madame's poached eggs and floating island this whole week, and I have five dollars coming to me to-morrow night. Now, we cannot

live on five a week, and its a poor, miserable price, anyway, for the world to pay such mighty minds as ours. I think I shall give matters a twist."

"If Miss Ogden would only take my story," began Avis, thoughtfully, but Betty interposed.

"That's just the place I am going to twist. I shall go there to-morrow, and find out all about it. Meanwhile, you must write to Muggins and tell her to send on more mince pie. It is very nutritious, I understand, and more filling than Madame's floating island. I don't intend that we shall spend Christmas weeping and wailing and gnashing our teeth, even if we are poor and needy. I don't know what gnashing means, but I always think it would hurt like sixty, and make a gritty noise like chewing sand. So we won't gnash. I mean that we shall have a good time, and a happy time—just you and Madame and I celebrating—if I have to spend all my five dollars as a last resort. And I'm going to twist everything else around our way."

"But, Betty," protested Avis, "I am strong enough to hunt up something to do"——

Betty threw a pillow with swift, sure aim at the rebel.

"Lie down and go to sleep," she commanded. "You must keep serene, Madame says. Any one

would think I was first mate here instead of captain. Don't you dare to answer back. I shall have Madame sit on the landing outside the door on guard all the time, and if you dare to attempt to escape you shall be padlocked to the bed. I can manage to do all the twisting myself."

All that Avis could do in the face of such authority was to obey, laughingly, and threaten dire possibilities for the morrow.

A few minutes past twelve the next day, Miss Ogden was surprised to find Betty standing beside her desk.

"Trouble, trouble, boil and bubble," she began at once. "I want work, Miss Ogden, so don't start in and give advice. My bud of genius, Avis, you remember, is sick, and something must happen right away. We need anything from ten dollars to a gold mine to relieve the pressure on the money market at the present moment."

Behind the brave, half laughing tone, Miss Ogden caught the undercurrent of real distress, and a quick wave of sympathy swept over her, for she liked Betty cordially.

"Sit down, girlie, and tell me all about it," she said, and Betty assented gladly. It did seem a great relief to tell it all to some one, all the struggle against the wolf,—“not one lone decent wolf, but a whole pack,” as she said,—all about Avis

and her ambitions and failure, even about Rook's Nest and the flock it sheltered, and she concluded, with her old common sense :

"Have you read her story, and can you use it?"

Miss Ogden tapped musingly on her desk with the blue pencil which she held, then opened a drawer and took Avis' manuscript from it.

"It is well written," she said, turning over the pages slowly. "I have read it carefully, and could use it if it was shorter, about 30,000 or 40,000 words. You know how it is, Betty, with a monthly magazine. A long serial drags so, and Mr. Newell says he does not wish me to accept any of this length."

Betty's lips closed firmly, and she considered a moment before answering.

"Who is Mr. Newell?"

"The publisher of the *Beauty*. He arrived this week from the East."

"Is he right here? Now?" A sudden idea flashed across Betty.

Miss Ogden nodded her head toward the oak paneled door at the end of the office.

"Right in there this minute," she said. "But I'm afraid it is hopeless, dear."

Betty picked up the manuscript, and there was the light of the war-path in her eyes.

"I'll talk with him, anyway," she said, reso-

lutely. "It can't do any harm, and it may settle everything all right. If I don't return in half an hour send after the remains. I feel as if I were being thrown to the lions in the arena. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, and good luck," returned Miss Ogden, smilingly, with her warm, friendly hand clasp, and she watched the erect girlish figure until it vanished beyond the oak paneled door into the "arena."

A very modern, bloodless arena it looked at first glance,—the light, well furnished private office of the publisher of the *American Beauty*. Betty had been in it before when she was working on the magazine, but this time, all she saw was the gentleman seated at the broad, flat-topped, mahogany desk in the centre of the room, absorbed in the perusal of the pile of letters and documents before him. He glanced at her questioningly over the rims of his eye-glasses, as she hesitated a moment at the door, and Betty threw down the gauntlet at once.

"I am Betty Morgan," she said, quickly, crossing to the desk and laying the manuscript upon it. "I used to be Miss Ogden's assistant. When we used the syndicate service I was editor. I want to see you, Mr. Newell, please, about this story, 'Lorraine's Legacy.'"

Mr. Newell drew the manuscript toward him, and looked at the title page. When he turned again to Betty, after a minute's silence, there was a new interest in his manner.

"Be seated, please, Miss Morgan," he said, with grave courtesy. "Do you know the author—personally?"

"Oh, yes, very, very well." The flood gates of Betty's sympathetic enthusiasm threatened to overflow at any moment, but she felt that she must preserve her dignity at all hazards, if the interview was to be a success. "Miss Randall is my friend. In fact, we are room mates. She has been very ill,—and—and,"—she floundered helplessly, trying to find the proper, business-like terms she wanted; but it was no use, and finally, she raised her head in desperation and charged on the enemy. Before she had time to regret her impulse, or recall her words, she had told Avis' story with the same unvarnished frankness that she had used to Miss Ogden. Mr. Newell listened in silence, his elbows on the arm of his easy chair, his finger tips pressed closely together.

"So you see that something must happen, and happen right now," concluded Betty, with a sigh of relief when the full burden of confession was off her shoulders. "Miss Ogden says she could use the story, only that you think it is too long. But

it would not hurt it to be cut, and Avis would not care, as long as it was accepted. And—and—oh, Mr. Newell, don't you think, just for once, you could break the new rule, and pay on acceptance? If I could take the check back to her to-day"—She paused. Such a possibility was too much to contemplate, or discuss, and still remain, as Madame would have said, serene. There was a suspicious brightness about her eyes, and something fell on the smooth, shiny surface of the desk, something that left a round, moist mark there. Her lashes were downcast, her hands clasped closely in her lap. She felt that the last shot was spent, and if the enemy's citadel yet held out, all hope was lost.

The silence was growing ominous, when finally Mr. Newell rose and glanced at his watch.

"It is nearly one o'clock," he said, slowly. "We have not much time. I intend leaving Chicago on the 5:10 express to spend Christmas with friends. Do you think you could persuade Avis to accompany me, Miss Morgan?" He met Betty's look of astonishment with a gleam of quiet amusement in his grey eyes, and added, "I am going to Rook's Nest."

Betty sat very still. She looked from Mr. Newell to the window to see if the world were just the same as it had been a moment before, or

whether it had suddenly taken a notion to turn topsyturvy. But it was just the same old, smoky world, and she looked back at Mr. Newell, a puzzled frown contracting her straight, dark eyebrows.

"But I don't see how on earth you can be going there," she began, vaguely. "It's a worse twist up now than it was before. What will Avis say?"

Mr. Newell smiled. He had long ago heard from Billie of her royal highness's eccentricities, especially where the Newells were concerned.

"I think the sooner we find that out, the better," he replied. "We will go to her at once. Just a moment, please, Miss Morgan."

He left the room, and Betty stared at the blue blotter on the desk as though such a remarkable curiosity had never come under her observation before. Newell? Where had she ever heard that name? Why, from Avis, of course, Avis herself, and she looked down at the manuscript. There it was in plain sight on the title page, Avis Newell Randall. She had forgotten the middle name altogether. Then Mr. Newell must be some relative. She knew the owner of the *American Beauty* must be wealthy; and her heart gave a quick, glad throb as she thought of the fourth floor back room, and of the ambitions and hopes that were struggling for existence there.

Mr. Newell reentered the room, and her lofty surmises took flight like a flock of frightened birds. He held a slip of paper in his hand, and handed it to her with a smile.

"I thought probably Avis' return home to the Nest would be happier if she were sure of this," he said. "The carriage is waiting for us now."

Betty's eyes were so dim as she looked at the magic figures on the generous check, that she did not even see Miss Ogden's friendly smile in her direction, as they passed through the outer office. All that she could think of was Avis waiting, and of the great joy which this Christmas held for her after all the bitter trials and disappointments of the past two months.

CHAPTER XXI

Red Rover to the Rescue

THE December sunshine filled the fourth floor back room with golden brightness, finding its way even through the dusty windows, and lingering lovingly on Avis' fair hair as she sat at her old place beside the little rickety table, and chewed the end of her pencil to chips.

It was ten o'clock. Betty had been gone over two hours, and Madame was down-stairs attending to her morning duties. Avis was thinking over the talk of the previous night with troubled feelings. She could not bear that Betty, generous, and loving as she was, should shoulder the burden of their support any more. She was so well and strong to-day, and it was such a glorious day, all sunlight and Christmas promise. She looked again at the open door, and laid down her pencil resolutely.

Madame was very busy, and no sound reached her of the light footstep on the stairs, or the closing of the front door, so it happened that the invalid found herself on the street, safe from solicitous

pursuit. It was so good to be well and free once more. Her one brief week of exile had seemed so long and tedious until now even the walk to the city was a treat, and she hurried on, so full of new plans that she did not stop at her favorite spot on the bridge, to catch a glimpse of the river, but went straight on to the heart of the city. She would try each of the newspaper offices and magazines where she had left short stories, she decided. Out of so many, surely some must have proven acceptable. Not a cent did she have with her, for every one had been garnered in with Betty's meagre store, in order to buy medicine, but she laughed to herself as she turned into the *Tribune* building as the first port of good promise, and thought of the possible riches that might be awaiting her.

She went direct to the Sunday editor's room. He was very pleasant. As he handed her a long envelope containing her story, with a few courteous words of regret, Avis wondered how he had time to be so pleasant over so hopeless a case, and she went back to the elevator with an odd, crushed feeling.

It was the same story over and over again. The long envelope, the declined story, the few words of regret. The only thing which varied was the degree of pleasantness in the editor's manner. When she had collected all of the rejected manuscripts,

she went over to the Public Library, and took refuge in one of Betty's favorite odd corners, the Roman seat on the first floor under the shadow of the arching stairway. She was very tired and lonely and heartsick. Moreover, but this was an incidental misfortune to which she was becoming accustomed, she was hungry. As Betty said, mince pie and floating island had been their staff of life for several days, with occasional diversions in the way of eggs, poached and otherwise. That morning there had been very little on the table standing beside the bed, and Avis had feigned caprice of appetite, that the bread winner might have plenty. But now that her bold onslaught upon the world had proven such a disastrous failure, she felt cold and faint.

Back and forth people hastened, but it was dusk in the corner at the side of the stairs, and no one noticed the slender figure sitting there, or the tears that fell on the long yellow envelopes. It was late in the afternoon, and every one was hurrying. Avis noticed how many wore tiny sprigs of holly in their buttonholes, and when a boy who looked like Billie passed the corner, whistling a fragment of a carol, she remembered all at once that it was Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve! She thought of the light, and warmth, and good cheer at Rook's Nest, of Muggins, and her little band of loving fol-

lowers, and of the feasting and merrymaking there would be, with Billie installed as king of the revels. The great electric globes around her flashed into sudden light and beauty. Betty and she had always loved these special ones that looked like colossal moonstones or opals, but now they only served to betray the secret of her hidden wailing place, and she rose to go.

The swinging outer doors were hard to open, and her eyes were so blurred that she could hardly see her way. Suddenly one of them was pushed inward from the outside and swung heavily toward her. She would have fallen but for some one's ready arm, some one tall, and dark, humming a song under his breath.

"I'm so sorry," he began, raising his cap, and opening the door for her. "Are you hurt?"

Avis recognized the voice in a moment, but she would not stop. Not for anything would she have Rob Rogers find her in the time of utter defeat, so she only shook her head, and attempted to pass by him. But something familiar in the contour of her figure caught Rob's attention, and he laid his hand on her arm.

"Avis," he said, "Avis, don't you know me? It's Rob. Wait a minute. I must see you."

She paused outside, and he joined her. The snow was falling and Avis had a sudden inclina-

tion to laugh as she remembered Madame's strict injunctions to keep serene, and to wear her "rub-baires."

"Why wouldn't you wait?" asked Rob, when they started to walk toward State Street. "I have been wanting to see you so that I could carry a message to Marjorie and the rest. I'm going home to-night to spend Christmas. Are you?"

"No."

He caught the smothered sob that accompanied the word, and bent forward to look at her face. It was white, and tear-stained.

"Avis," he exclaimed, "you're crying."

There was no response.

"How white you are!"

"I have been ill," she said, making a brave effort to conceal from him how faint and tired she was.

Rob thought deeply for a minute. He had met Betty once or twice at the library and remembered some of her frank admissions as to the financial state of affairs in the partnership of Morgan & Randall, "Ambitionists," as she had added. He knew also of the change in the editorial staff on the magazine, and so drew his own conclusions.

"I just came from the office," he said, "and was going to have a quiet little read all by myself in the library among the new magazines. But I'm

hungry as a wolf, and we'll go and have a feast of reason somewhere, and talk the case over. I know you ought to have soup or something like that when it's so cold, and you've been sick. Marjorie or mother would make you take it, so I'm going to."

"No, no—I wont"—Avis began, rebelliously, with a touch of her old, quick pride; but Rob only laughed, and, taking her resolutely by the arm, hurried her along, stopping only at a corner stand to buy a great, loose cluster of pink roses.

"It's Merry Christmas," he said, placing them in her unwilling hands. "No fair being cross at Christmas. You must forgive all old scores and be friends, because we're just a couple of homesick waifs to-night. How dark the falling snow makes it. It is only half-past three. Doesn't all the holly and evergreen and snow and everything make you want to run and shout like sixty? It does me. I'd like to be right up yonder on the top of the Masonic Temple with a megaphone, or some kind of a 'phone, and yell 'Merry Christmas' down at the whole crowd. Marjorie would be awfully glad to see you."

The last came so suddenly that Avis caught her breath, but he did not give her time to reply, for they had reached the restaurant and he hurried her into its bright, warm entrance.

"I don't usually come here," he explained, with

boyish honesty, when they were seated. "Only Christmas and birthdays. Had one birthday here all by myself the first month I came. I was so blue and homesick I told the waiter it was my birthday, and gave him a dime to wish me many happy returns, but he didn't. This is my first Christmas. What shall we eat?"

Avis leaned back in her chair, watching the reflections in the mirrored walls. She tried to feel indignant, and reserved, but it was a hard task when one was cold and hungry, and had been suddenly whisked into this fairy-land of good promise, so she only answered:

"You order anything, please. I am so tired I don't care."

So Red Rover ordered, and it was a feast of plenty, and he laughed and talked more than ever so that no suspicion should lurk in Avis' mind that he thought her really hungry, for he knew the pride of her royal highness. Finally when all was finished, he looked at her critically. The tired look was gone from her eyes, and her cheeks had a faint flush on them that was like a reflection from the roses in her hand.

"Now you look like yourself, and not like a stiff-necked ghost," he said, approvingly. "Do you know what is going to happen now?"

She shook her head, and smiled. It was such

a delightful novelty to be told what she must do, after she had made a failure of her own way so long.

"Well, then," continued Red Rover, decidedly, "your royal highness is going back to Rook's Nest with me on the 5:10 express, and you haven't a moment to lose."

"I wouldn't do it for anything." In an instant Avis was her old self, fighting against that Rogers' boy. Go home, indeed, defeated and heartsick, without a single trophy won, while all the children blew trumpets of Red Rover's fame in her ears! Not for the world would she do so, not even for a sight of the dear faces, and the touch of Marjorie's hand. She rose from the table.

"It is late," she said. "Betty will be expecting me."

Rob was silent until they reached the street. He wished with all his heart that Billie was there to manage the "stiff-necked damsel." He could see that Avis was worn out and disheartened and half sick now, and how Marjorie would love to pet her, and nurse her back to strength and contentment. But all schemes faded from his mind as he glanced at their object, walking on quickly, her head erect, her air resolute and defiant.

"Are you going to take the car?" Rob asked, mildly, as a friendly overture.

"No. I like to walk," came the unequivocal



"HER HEAD ERECT, HER AIR RESOLUTE AND DEFIANT"

answer. It would never do, she thought, to let him know she did not own a nickel in the world.

A fragment of Billie's advice concerning treatment for Avis under such circumstances occurred to Rob.

"If she's just huffy, rush her, and take her by surprise. If she's hopping mad, don't notice her. Do as you please, and it will come out all right. She is a rebellious and unruly people, saith the prophet."

A North State Street car was waiting at the Lake Street terminus, and Rob made up his mind at once.

"It's too cold to walk," he said, briskly, and before Avis could gasp a remonstrance, she was on the car, speeding northward. Rob laughed at her expression of suppressed indignation.

"We haven't much time to lose before 5:10," he said. "This will save ten minutes, anyway."

"But I won't go," she began, vehemently. Then all at once the great homesickness swept over her, and she forgot her grievance of the moment, as she added helplessly, "Don't you suppose I would go if I could? Don't you suppose that I want to see them all so badly that I can hardly stand it? But I won't go back till I have something to show for my coming. I won't go back like a bad penny. You may tell Marjorie that if you wish."

Rob was silent, but doing a lot of thinking in his own way.

"Isn't there any way out of it at all?" he asked at last, when they left the car at Huron Street and hurried over to Madame Penionte's.

A sudden hope brightened Avis' face. There was a carriage standing in front of the house with the low French doorway, but she scarcely noticed it.

"There would be a way," she said, as they entered the vestibule. "If Betty should happen to have a check for a hundred dollars for me."

"Is it a joke?" he asked. Rob's face was very serious. He had stepped into the little reception room at the side of the hall to wait for her, when all at once the portieres at the far end of the room were parted and Madame swept down on Avis like a hen on a runaway chick.

"Oh, ma petite, but it is Bettee who is cra-zee!" she cried, folding Avis in a close embrace. "She has seen you dead, crushed, fainted, brought home in very small pieces. And you did forget ze rub-baires."

The last was a wail of reproach, but Betty's voice called over the banisters:

"Come up here this minute, Avis Newell Randall. I wish you merry Christmas even if you do die of a relapse next week. Don't stop to argue

or talk, but come up. I've got something for you."

Avis hesitated.

"Rob is with me," she returned, doubtfully, and Betty laughed.

"Hurrah! He was the only domino missing to make the set. Come on, and bring him, too!"

Madame nodded her head mysteriously.

"It is quite true," she said. "It is one grand surprise she has. Oh, but so tall, so splendid he is. And ze coupé. Bettée came home in a coupé."

"She must have the check," Avis said, turning to Rob with a tremulous, uncertain smile. "Let's all go up."

At the top of the stairs stood Betty, radiant, with a perfect halo of happiness around her joyous face.

"Avis, Avis," she exclaimed, as she met the runaway with outstretched hands. "The most wonderful fairy tale in the world has come true, and we're all going to Muggins and the Nest."

"How much?" asked Avis, breathlessly, thinking only of the possible check; but suddenly she saw the stranger who stood in the centre of the back room, and she paused on the threshold, tired, and astonished. It was Betty who managed the introduction with her usual happy felicity.

"This is Avis," she said, the words fairly tumbling over each other in her eagerness to tell everything at once. "And Rob, Rob Rogers, you know. Avis Randall, look at that check. The budding genius has budded and blossomed at last. And this is Mr. Newell, Uncle Harvey, your own Uncle Harvey, and he owns the whole magazine, and I'm never going to work any more, and we're all going to Rook's Nest right now! Oh, dear, Madame, so many things have happened all in a bunch that I think I am turning into a whirligig. Avis, please don't look pale like that."

Avis seated herself on the edge of the worn lounge, and tried to smile.

"I feel pale," she said, unsteadily. "It is all so mixed up. Where is Aunt Bethiah Newell?"

"Dead," returned Betty, solemnly, forestalling Mr. Newell's explanation. "I am the only Bethiah Newell, now. How much time have I, father?"

Mr. Newell glanced at his watch.

"Just fifteen minutes to talk, girly," he answered, while Rob and Avis looked at each other in amazement. "Tell it quickly."

"Well, then, listen, folkses," Betty stood up on the chair at the end of the room, where Avis usually sat to work and write, and began, impressively, her brown eyes shining with excitement.

"First of all, Uncle Harvey is the Aunt Bethiah whom Avis has worried over, and never told me a word about all this time. Second, Uncle Harvey is Mr. Newell, publisher of the *American Beauty*, and other things. Third, Uncle Harvey"—she paused, and looked around proudly, "is Bethiah Newell's father, and I am Bethiah Newell, and that's what we two have found out this afternoon."

"But how?" asked Rob. Avis was silent from sheer astonishment. Betty pointed to the picture of her mother in the bronze frame.

"We came for Avis, but found her gone," she answered. "Then father saw that, and nearly had a fit"——

"O, Bettie," interposed Madame, in despair. "Not a fit. He lose the tr-ranquility."

"Well, I should say he did, rather," laughed Betty, gaily. "And so will Aunt Felicia lose the tranquility when I write and tell her that I've found my own dear father, and that I've got a name at last. Avis, I'm your own, ownliest cousin, and cousin to Muggins and the whole menagerie and Billie. Don't you understand it all?"

"Oh, Betty, I'm so glad for you!" Betty's arms were around her new cousin, and Avis' blue eyes had lost their tired look as she returned her smile. "What will they all say at the Nest?"

"Time's up," called Mr. Newell. "Robert, boy, you and I will go down-stairs and wait for these two excited young persons to follow. Only two minutes allowed for taking leave, daughter."

The door closed, and Betty sat down on the top of the table with a raptuous sigh.

"Avis Randall," she said, impressively. "Just think after being nobody for over nineteen years, all at once to wake up, and find out you're somebody, and somebody special at that."

But Madame waved sentiment aside, and checked the flood of words.

"Two minutes," she cried, rushing to Avis with her neglected rubbers. "It is not to talk, Bettee. It is to act ze rapid. Ze coupé waits. Avie, put on your rubbaires. So. Leave everything as it is; I will keep it all most secluded, and send ze trunks to you. Ah, Bettee, so shabby ze jacket and ze gloves to ride in a coupé. You shall have my white gloves. They are so much ze genteel."

"I won't have anything of the sort," exclaimed Betty, indignantly. "The idea of such a thing! Your white gloves, indeed! Never you mind, you dear. I'll come back civilized and genteel, and never, never forget you, you old darling, or your delicious floating islands."

She seized the old French lady in her strong,

young arms, and gave her a royal squeeze that left both of them breathless.

"I've got the satchel, Avis," she added. "Packed it this afternoon while we were waiting for you. And that's all."

The two girls stood side by side in the old, shabby room, and looked around for the last time, while Madame smiled at them through fast falling tears. The room was dim, and they could see the snow coming down heavily beyond the dusty lace curtains.

"Bless it," said Betty, softly. "It has been our castle, Avis. Seems as if we were deserting an old friend, doesn't it?"

"Go, go at once," protested Madame, plaintively. "Or it will be ze grand weep."

It came very near being a grand weep before all were safely settled in the carriage, waving good-bye to the stately figure standing alone in the low, French doorway, with the dusk and falling snow around her.

"Isn't it glorious, Avis!" exclaimed Betty, laying one cheek lovingly against Mr. Newell's coat sleeve. "Isn't it glorious to belong to people of your very own, and leave all the world behind to fight, and worry on in its old, bothersome, twisted up way?"

Her royal highness only smiled back happily,

her head leaning on the soft cushions. She was tired, so very tired now that it was over. It all seemed like some marvelous dream, but one thing was in her thoughts clearly all the time. She did hope Marjorie would be at the little front window watching the road to the ravine.

CHAPTER XXII

The Birds Fly Home

"It's snowing like all get out," Billie announced, as he came stamping into the kitchen from the wood-shed, his arms full of split logs for the fire. "Won't the old boy have a great time coming from the station, though! Wish I knew what train he will take. I'd hitch up Mr. Rogers' team, and drive over for him."

"He won't get any thupper," murmured the Lion, wisely, as he followed Marjorie back and forth from the table to the pantry with a suspicious faithfulness. "Thereth going to be jelly, and cake, and pie, and whole pileth of thingth, Billie."

"And Dora knows where there're just piles of popcorn, and nuts, and candy, and she won't tell," put in Winnie, aggrievedly, from her perch on top of the wood-box behind the stove, where she was toasting herself.

"I wish candy and doughnutth gwowed on twees like nutth, don't you, Winnie," whispered the Lion, but Billie shook his head at them severely.

"Dora's been snooking round," he said. "Get off that wood-box immediately, or else there'll be a buried Owl under a cord of logs."

"Oh, dear, dear," laughed Marjorie, waving both hands for order, as Winnie sent up a howl for mercy. "Such a menagerie! Billie, behave. Winnie wee, please get a broom, and have Dora help you sweep a nice, clean walk to the gate before any one comes. And don't any one dare to look into the sitting-room."

"I stuffed the keyhole," said Billie, confidently. "Say, Muggins," he added, as soon as the menagerie had fled, and he leaned over the table mysteriously. "Bet a cookie Rob comes home, don't you?"

Marjorie set the milk pitcher down in the middle of the table with a hard bump that nearly upset its creamy contents.

"Now, don't shut your mouth all up screwy and tight," Billie went on, hurriedly. "I know what you're thinking about, and I wish she were here, too, of course, but as long as she isn't, don't let's all act as if we were chewing tacks with red pepper on them. It's Christmas all the same."

Marjorie did not reply, but went on preparing supper steadily, her eyes bright and tearless. Billie stood over by the window, his hands deep in his pockets, his feet wide apart, whistling with

a doleful attempt at cheerfulness. Each was thinking of her royal highness in their own way, Marjorie with the old, tender love, and longing for "the one who looked like mother;" Billie with half resentful curiosity, wondering as he always did, why on earth Avis couldn't be sensible like other folks, and not be forever cutting up some dignified didoes, as he expressed it when he and the Lamb held solemn counsel.

All at once there came a riotous shout of welcome from the front yard, and the menagerie rushed into the entry, escorting Mrs. Rogers and Allyn Keith.

"Land alive, but it's coming down," laughed the former, shaking the big soft flakes from her pink crocheted fascinator that had been one of the Lamb's creations of artistic beauty. "Mother Hulda's shaking up the feather beds to-night, isn't she, chickens?"

Here Billie smuggled various bundles from their hiding-place beneath her shawl, and made a stealthy rush for the front room with the girls and Reggie in full cry at his heels.

"Isn't it heart cheering to hear them when they're so happy, though?" said Mrs. Rogers, with a sigh of content. "Did your pies come out all right, dear?"

"Lovely," replied Marjorie, raising one on her

palm to show its beauties. "All flaky and brown edged."

Suddenly Dora popped her head in at the door.

"Where's Mr. Rogers?" she asked, abruptly.

"Maybe he won't be over, dear," returned Mrs. Rogers, a twinkle in her kind, grey eyes, as she tied on an apron to help Marjorie with the supper. "It's right cold and snowy, you know, and he wants to bed the stock well, and he's got a touch of rheumatism, too, and it's getting down to zero."

"Oh, dear, we want him so," began Dora, disconsolately. "Is Rob coming home?"

Here a real shadow fell on Mrs. Rogers' bright, happy face.

"I don't know, Dora," she replied, in a troubled tone. "He hasn't written for nearly a week. Christmas won't seem Christmas without Rob, but we must learn not to worry over our waifs, mustn't we, Marjorie?"

Marjorie nodded. She could not trust herself to speak with the tears so perilously near her eyes, so she only smiled and went to the door to call the menagerie to supper. They came trooping in after Billie, all mournful and indignant.

"It's drefful," said the Owl, as soon as all were seated at the table. "We're only half a family. We're only got Mr. Keith for company, and Mrs.

Rogers for extra. And there's Rob, and Mr. Rogers, and Avis"——

Billie tried to kick her foot warningly, but missed it, and nearly knocked the centre leaf out of the table. After the excitement over the averted catastrophe had subsided, Winnie went on serenely :

"And Avis. They're all away. And it's perfectly drefful."

"Drefful," echoed the Lion, hesitating between an offer of peach preserves and strawberry jam.

"Take which you like best, Reggie," counseled Dora, but he shook his head wistfully.

"Bofe are betht," he said, sadly.

Up at the head of the table sat Marjorie and Allyn.

"Have you told Mr. Newell about finding your uncle's legacy yet?" the latter asked, and Marjorie looked serious over the question.

"Why, no, I haven't," she answered, quickly. "You see, we expected that he would stay in Chicago only one week, and I thought I could tell him when he came home. I wrote to Mr. Ellis all about it, you know, to see if it were right for me to keep it, and he settled everything for me. The money is in the bank at East Elmore. I want to send Billie to college, and look out for all of them now. Of course Uncle Harvey has been very kind, but I shall be glad to be independent of his help.

One always feels that way, you know. And I love my old Rook's Nest so well, now, that I wouldn't care to leave it for anything."

"Not even for Boston, and a brown stone front with Uncle Harvey?" called Billie, from his end of the table.

"Not for seventeen and a half brown stone fronts," laughed Marjorie, and the menagerie, under Billie's leadership, once more proclaimed in stentorian tones to the world at large that Princess Muggins was the best and only brick, and that they would never, never, never leave Rook's Nest.

All at once Dora jumped up from her chair, and ran to the door.

"I hear something out there," she exclaimed in an excited whisper. The Lion at once slid under the table, and selected Marjorie's skirts as a place of refuge. Everybody listened. The front door opened stealthily, and in the darkness a strange looking figure could be seen going into the sitting-room. Then came a great stamping and jingling of sleigh bells behind the closed doors, and Winnie climbed up on the back of her chair, her blue eyes wide and startled at this sudden demonstration. The old clock on the mantel struck eight with its slow, creaking chime.

"It's himself," whispered Billie, pointing a warning finger at the Owl, "and Winnie'll get a

turkey feather, and Dora 'll get a chestnut burr, and Reggie a snowstar."

There was a howl of indignant dissent at once, and Dora proposed a hidden ambush in the hallway, so that they might all take a look at Santa Claus when he emerged from the sitting-room. They tiptoed softly down the entry, and snuggled into a corner, a silent, expectant group. Strange sounds could be heard from the sitting-room, and the Owl kept one arm firmly around Reggie, whose valor and discretion were always doubtful in moments of danger. At the far end of the hall, Marjorie and the rest watched the ambush with merry faces.

Suddenly the sleigh bells jingled again, and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

"All ready, polliwogs," whispered Billie, and as the sitting-room door opened there appeared a round, roly poly form, with a great fur coat and cap on that nearly hid all of him except two twinkling eyes, and a long white beard.

For an instant the beard startled the menagerie, but Dora saw the eyes, and led the onslaught with a shout of triumph. After a wild and thrilling battle, the enemy was vanquished, and led back into the sitting-room, his fur cap gone, his white beard trailing under the Owl's arm, and the Lion perched high on his shoulder.

"We knew you all the time, Mr. Rogers," cried the Lamb, dancing first on one foot, then on the other. "Leastways, anyhow," she corrected herself, "we 'spected. How's your rheumatism?"

"Everybody behave, and treat Santa Claus respectfully," called Marjorie, restoring the white beard to its owner. "At infinite expense of time and labor he has made his way to Rook's Nest tonight, and will bestow gifts on all deserving of his love. Please step right to the tree, sir, and do whatever you think best."

In the center of the floor was the tree that had been brought from the woods, but such a transformed tree! Its boughs were twined with festoons of popcorns, with tiny pink and blue bags of candy dangling from the ends, and colored candles gleaming prettily here and there. Best of all, any number of mysterious packages, all shapes, sizes and conditions, were suspended from the branches, or heaped high around the box.

"Sit down, folkses," ordered Billie, as self-installed master of ceremonies. "Reggie, get out from under the tree. Candles are not sticks of peppermint, my child. Mrs. Rogers is to have the big chair. The Owl may perch on the sofa. Dora, you sit down here."

"I won't," said the Lamb, blandly, from her point of vantage on top of the center table. "I

shall stay right here, brother William. I can see more. You just want this seat your own self. Look out for Marjorie."

"Oh, go ahead," said Marjorie, who had seated herself at the window looking toward the ravine. "Don't mind me."

"Are you meditating or moping?" asked Billie, anxiously.

"Meditating," she answered, laughingly, whereupon Billie decided to leave her in peace, as the menagerie fully occupied his time, so he told Santa Claus to fire ahead.

While the happy cries and merry little shrieks of surprise sounded back of her, Marjorie bent forward in the dim shelter of the curtains, and watched the road which passed by the little house, traveling on in a happy go lucky, zigzag way, until it tumbled over the hillside into the dark depths of the ravine. Her eyes were sad and thoughtful. The burden of the last few months had not lain lightly on her shoulders, although she had tried with all her heart to be her own bright, hopeful self; but to-night she felt more than ever how the jolly careless ways of Billie and the menagerie had deserted her, and how she longed for the companionship and sympathy of Avis, not the new Avis, but the old one, as she had been before the coming of "Aunt Bethiah."

She wondered where her royal highness was to-night. Probably she and Betty had been invited to some literary affair—what was it they called them? Oh, yes. Soireés, that was it. They must have gone to some beautiful, Christmas Eve soireé, where they would meet all manner of famous people.

What would Avis wear? She leaned her head on her hands, and pondered, while the voices behind her grew fainter and fainter. That grey dress must be getting shabby by this time. Perhaps she had a new dress. Something dainty and rich, just for state occasions such as this. Marjorie could shut her eyes and almost see her as she entered the brilliantly illuminated apartment, and how all the famous people would ask each other who this new celebrity could be, this wonderful young creature who moved and acted like a princess.

It was delightful to dream of. Even the Owl herself could not have imagined a fairer dream. She forgot all about the children and the tree, and the snow and darkness outside seemed to melt away into the gaiety and brightness of the city far away, the wonderful city that was to crown Avis with the laurels of fame, and pour its wealth into her hands.

Yet, as she thought again, she was half sorry,

because in her new life Avis needed neither help nor comfort from the home Nest. Of course, she would never really forget them, Marjorie was sure of that, no matter how successful she became; but it was natural that she should drift away into her own charmed circle and not feel the close love ties that bound the rest together. And some day, perhaps ——

The snow must be piling up high in the roadway, or else her dreams were leading her fancy astray. She pressed her face closely to the window pane, and held her breath. There was a peculiar blur in the outlines beyond the gate; it must be the falling snow, only she was sure she caught a tinkle of sleigh bells. She rose to her feet and took a longer look. The gate opened. A man's figure, too tall for Uncle Harvey, was entering the garden, and behind him ——

Suddenly Santa Claus and his joyous flock were amazed to hear a quick, glad cry from the window. The curtains were thrust aside and Marjorie paused in their midst only long enough to gasp, "It's Avis!" before she rushed pell mell to the front door, and nearly fell straight into Rob's arms.

"Steady," cried Red Rover, righting her, laughingly, and reaching out to his mother's embrace. "Merry Christmas, everybody! We've brought her royal highness home again."

CHAPTER XXIII

Fairy Tales Come True

BEHIND him stood Mr. Newell, his arm around Avis, but he gave her up to Marjorie's eager arms without a word, while one more figure hesitated in the background. But Billie saw it. He looked around quickly. Rob was with his mother and father, laughing and shaking hands. Marjorie had drawn Avis into the cosy sitting-room before the warm fire, and the menagerie had swooped down upon Mr. Newell. The stranger stood with her back against the door, shaking the snow from her red Tam O'Shanter, and watching the general reunion with happy eyes.

"Aren't you Betty?"

She turned quickly. It was, it must be Billie. She felt that she would have known the short sturdy figure, and round freckled face, if she had met them in No Man's land, and she gave his outstretched hand a hearty, responsive grasp.

So it happened that by the time the rest of the newcomers had recovered presence of mind enough to think of the existence of Betty, they found her

seated on the sofa with Billie, getting acquainted at a startlingly rapid rate.

"Never mind, now, Avis," Billie protested, as the former started to introduce her cousin. "I can manage that part. Folkses, this is Betty Morgan, and you will all please remember that I have always said she was a brick. Betty, the brown one is Muggins, and the three over there choking Uncle Harvey by slow degrees, are the only and original menagerie, and Santa Claus is Mr. Rogers, and this is Mrs. Santa Claus, and Rob is Santa Claus, Jr."

"Just a minute, Billie boy," Mr. Newell interposed. "Let me add a little more to that introduction." He laid his hand lovingly on Betty's brown hair, tumbled and blown about by the wind. "This is also my own dear daughter, Bethiah Newell, and your cousin, children."

It was all as Winnie said, "honest true." After the unexpected guests had been toasted and fed with all kinds of good things, every one gathered in the cosy parlor, and there under the shadow of the Christmas tree, were told the wondrous fairy tales that had come true. The tale of the cistern ghost, and of Marjorie's treasure trove—not so very much, of course, as riches are reckoned, but enough to make her feel strong and independent and sure of Rook's Nest, as she told Uncle Harvey.

Then came Betty's story, and that was the most interesting of all. She told it herself, and all the children listened eagerly, Billie and the Lamb with a growing conviction that next to Muggins this brown eyed young person was the greatest brick and all around good fellow who had come into the kingdom of Rattletibang for many a moon.

"It all happened because I wanted Avis to have that check," began Betty, nodding her head at them all, as she sat on the sofa with Uncle Harvey bending over the high carved back. "If it hadn't been for her story, I should have been a poor, lone, lorn orphan this minute instead of being hugged suddenly in the bosom of a family all my own. After I got the check, we went home to Madame's" —

"The old darling who made floating islands and things?" asked Dora, eagerly.

"Yes. And, of course, we found Avis gone. While I was fussing around, and worrying, and watching at the front room windows for the ambulance to come with the remains, all at once I heard Mr. Newell—father, you know—exclaim, 'Miss Morgan, come here.' I was afraid he had discovered the cracker boxes under the lounge, or some hidden skeleton of our Poverty Palace. I hurried to where he stood, but all he had was a picture of mamma that always sat on the bureau.

I was so surprised I couldn't speak, until he asked :

"Where did Avis get this picture?"

"Avis doesn't know anything about it," I said. "It's mine—the portrait of my mother."

"How lovely," sighed the Owl, and Betty was at once transformed into a beautiful long lost princess in her eyes.

"Then what happened?" urged Billie.

"Then he asked my name, and I told him Betty Morgan, but that the last was my aunt's name, not my own. Then it all came out in a rush, about Aunt Felicia, and how mamma died, leaving me a tiny baby; and then he told me how he was my own father, and had married mamma when he was only about twenty-two, when he was out West here on business for his father" —

"That's Grandpa Newell," whispered the Lamb to Billie, in an audible aside. "He was a regular old Tartar."

"They were so happy for awhile," went on Betty, "and then he had to return East, and they decided the wisest plan was for mamma to go to her home where Aunt Felicia lived, while father went and told his parents he was married, and then he would either send for her to come to Boston, or else come back West himself, according as they took the news. Well, when he reached Bos-

ton, he found that Aunt Avis had married against her father's wishes, and everything was in a peck of trouble, so he put off telling of his own affair from day to day, to spare his father another shock."

"I'm so glad some one else shocked him besides mamma," murmured the Lamb, fervently, leaning forward, her chin on her palms.

"So the time went on, and, although he wrote and wrote to mamma, he never heard a word from her, so, of course, Aunt Felicia must have intercepted the letters. Finally he received a line from her, saying I had been born, and both mamma and I died, and that she never wished to hold any communication with a Newell again."

"Bet a cookie she was a stiff-necked old damsel all right," chuckled Billie, and at this point Mr. Newell himself took up the narrative.

"So, you see, children, your old stern uncle had a burden to bear in life that probably made him more reserved, and morose, and"—

"All fwoze up," suggested the Lion, interestedly.

"Yes, that was it," he assented, smilingly, "all froze up, Reggie, and so full of the bitterness of his own sorrow that he had no sympathy or love to share with others, until Billie's letter awakened him. After Aunt Bethiah died I believed I had no one of my own people in the world to care for. My immediate family were all gone, and I knew

nothing of Avis, your mother, or of her children, since the rumor had reached me of her death. The rest Betty has told you."

There was silence for a minute, broken only by the Lion choking as he tried to swallow a whole string of popcorn, then Mr. Newell continued:

"Only one thing remains. Who will return to Boston with Betty and me?"

No one spoke a word, but they all looked at Marjorie. Her face flushed warmly under the fire of anxious scrutiny, but she answered as Billie and the menagerie knew she would:

"We love Rook's Nest best, Uncle Harvey. You have been so kind and generous to us, but you have Betty, now, so you won't be lonely. We all want to stay here, unless Avis"——

"Please let me stay, too," said Avis, in a low tone. "I do not care to run away again."

The circle of heads around Marjorie bobbed in grave assent, and Mr. Newell laughed, as he removed his eye-glasses to polish them thoughtfully.

"Then if the mountain won't come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain, eh, Betty? I daresay that even you would rather join forces with this independent and rebellious family than go away to Boston with only your old father for company."

Betty had an inward struggle with the frank in-

clination to remain right where she was, and the new love that bade her stand loyal to her father. At last she replied, with a deep sigh:

"I'd go with you anywhere, father, to—to Madagascar, even, if you said so; but if the mountain could get up and trot west, it would be splendid."

"Just so," returned Mr. Newell, decidedly. "I think it will have to trot. Most of my business interests are centered now in Chicago, and all of my heart interests here in Rook's Nest. Since Princess Muggins defies me, and all of her subjects follow suit, I have but one alternative. Betty and I will have to build us a castle of our own out here in the wild west, and keep you all under our protection. Mr. Rogers, do you think we could find a few odd hills and ravines for sale?"

"Miles of them," answered Santa Claus, heartily. "Prettiest land in the state."

"Then we will settle in East Elmore," Mr. Newell declared. "I have already taken the liberty of investing a little of your share of the Newell fortunes, children, in—in real estate."

Marjorie and Avis exchanged quick glances of surprise, and Billie stared.

"City real estate," he continued, a smile on his genial face. "In fact, Mr. Ellis, your lawyer and I have recovered possession of a valuable piece of property, the old Randall home."

"Uncle Harvey!" exclaimed all, in one breath, and Dora rose precipitately to embrace him.

"One at a time," he laughed, with uplifted hand. "I thought you would all approve. You can take up winter quarters there, if you like, and in summer come back to Rook's Nest. While Betty and I are waiting for our castle to rise, may we ask permission to make our home with you for a while?"

"Oh! fine!" cried all the children in chorus.

"And Billie must go to college," added Mr. Newell.

"Geewollikins, that's the way it always ends up," exclaimed William, aggrievedly. "Muggins is just as bad. You all plan a pile of jolly things, and then say, 'Billie must go to college.' Want to pack me off to cram, and wear choker collars, and part my hair in the middle, and kill myself playing football, while you have a circus of a time. That's what they do with a fellow! Keep him a nice, good little boy, until he does get old enough to have a good time in his own way, and then smother him in books, and bury him alive in college. Uncle Harvey, Muggins needs a man around the house."

Uncle Harvey's eyes twinkled shrewdly as he glanced over to where Allyn Keith sat beside Marjorie, the Lion on his knee, heroically submitting

while the latter decked him with popcorn and tinsel.

"I know that, Billie boy," he said, gravely, "but I wouldn't worry much about that phase of the question if I were you. From a little side talk which I enjoyed with Allyn once, I imagine that the post of man about the house is already spoken for, is it not, Marjorie?"

Marjorie blushed hotly at the sudden disclosure, but met the charge with all her old honest directness.

"Some day, Uncle Harvey, 'way off."

"Well, of all measly, one-sided arrangements," exclaimed Billie, wrathfully. "After the way we've all stood by Marjorie through thick and thin! And now Mr. Keith, you think you can take her away! Why didn't you ask my consent?"

He paused, for all save the menagerie were laughing. The Lion had promptly deserted Allyn at Billie's first words, and now all four stood in a row staring in stern reproach at the two culprits.

"Billie, listen," Allyn rose, too, and faced his inquisitor. "It wasn't quite fair, I know, but we thought you knew and approved all the time."

"All what time?" demanded the elder brother, his head on one side, his hands plunged deep into

their favorite resting-places. "Since when has this been going on?"

"Since the day in the barn, I guess, when I first saw Princess Muggins," and Allyn's tone was more serious now. "But at all events," he went on, "whenever it may happen, I shall only be prince consort, you know, and the princess is always your same dear Marjorie."

"Always," interposed Marjorie, positively, "and we beg that you will never desert the Nest, Billie, or lead a revolt and all take to the woods; because Winnie never could live in a cave on grasshoppers and cocoanuts, and the Lion is afraid of bugs, and toads, and crawly things, and you and Dora would look so funny dressed in wolf skins and eagle feathers, and trying to shoot the wild, wicked bees on the wing. So we beg that you will be true and loyal Rattletibangers for ever and ever."

The Owl sighed, and wavered.

"It's drefful, of course," she began, helplessly, "but as long as it's Muggins"——

"They ought to have asked us about it," added the Lamb, with a last faint stand for Billie, "but as long as it's Mr. Keith"——

Billie saw at once that he would be left alone in another moment, and capitulated.

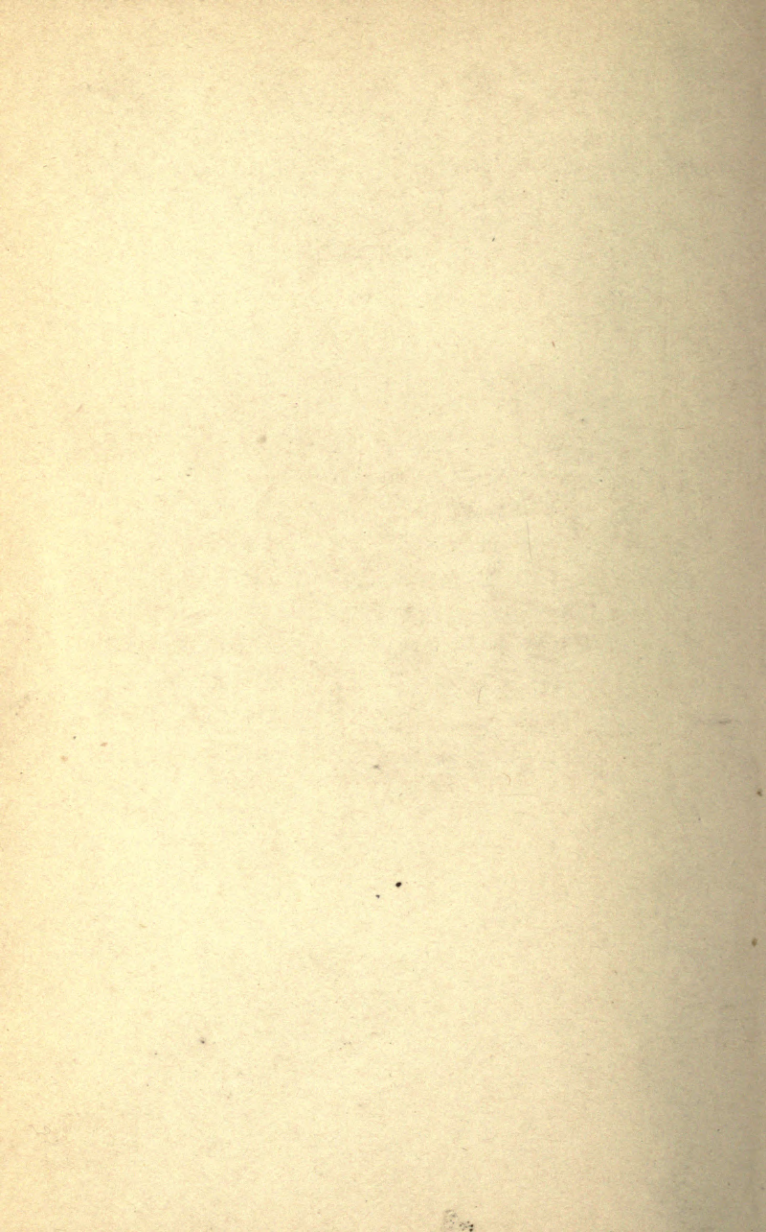
"Take her, my son," he said, solemnly. "If

you ever need a friend, remember your brother William, Muggins. Never can tell what may happen when folks get married. Not but what you're a good sort, Mr. Keith, but I always had hopes you would be the one to make her royal highness stop cutting up her didoes. However, Rob's made a good beginning in that way—now, don't talk back, Avis. Betty, keep her serene, please—so I will withdraw all opposition, and say, bless you, my children. Polliwogs, attention!"

And while all the rest of the happy company stood up, and cheered joyously, the menagerie danced their old time Feejee dance of triumph around the tree, and sang their battle song, for the love and honor of Princess Muggins, and her castle.

“ For we'll never, never, never,
No, we'll never, never, never,
Oh, we'll never, never, néver
Leave our blessed Rook's Nest.”

THE END



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